

NBA MIDSEASON REPORT

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

*The Unlikely
MVP*

**JAMES
HARDEN**

№ 24



*The Unlikely
Turnaround*

**THE
WARRIORS**

№ 32

*The Unlikely
Breakout Star*

**JIMMY
BUTLER**

№ 38

A TRIBUTE

**DEAN
SMITH**

1931–2015

*“I could be
the best player
in the world.”*

—JAMES HARDEN
TO LEE JENKINS

A LEGEND

UNGUARDED



SHOWTIME

SATURDAY FEB 28 9PM ET/PT

KOBE BRYANT'S

MUSE

A red ink signature of Kobe Bryant, written in a stylized cursive script.

A FIERCELY PERSONAL DOCUMENTARY



2.23.15

2015 | VOLUME 122 | NO. 8

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James Harden

Three years ago he wasn't sure he had what it takes. Now the league is trying to keep up

By Lee Jenkins

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What's next for
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+

◀ KLAYMATION

With his team off to its best start ever, Warriors guard Klay Thompson is in a golden state of mind.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
TODD ROSENBERG FOR
SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

SI HAS REGIONAL
COVERS THIS WEEK:
ROBERT SEALE FOR
SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
(HARDEN); BILL BAPTIST/
NBAE/GETTY IMAGES
(THOMPSON); GREG
NELSON FOR SPORTS
ILLUSTRATED (BUTLER)

Sports Illustrated

SI NOW

WITH HOST
MAGGIE GRAY



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POWERED BY FORD



"I don't like to talk about myself. I'm more of a team guy."

—Anthony Davis

50 [points] and hitting 10 threes. Both of them are doing tremendous things. **MD:** *Would you put yourself in that conversation?*

AD: Y'all can—I'm not going to. I don't like to talk about myself. I'm more of a team guy. Being in the conversation is definitely a blessing, but it's all about my team. Without my team, I wouldn't be in this situation. They definitely put me in a position to where my name can be brought up.

MD: *If there was one guy in the NBA you could steal a move from, whose move would you want to add to your repertoire?*

AD: James Harden's step-back. It's vicious. He goes right, and then the step-back is money. And he does a great job of drawing fouls as well, so I'd definitely have to take that one. □

For more of Davis's interview, plus the SI Now archive, go to SI.com/sinow

ANTHONY DAVIS The Pelicans' power forward, who is averaging 24.5 points per game, tells SI.com's Matt Dollinger why he skipped his first start in the NBA All-Star Game and who gets his MVP vote

MATT DOLLINGER: *Why did you decide to sit out the All-Star Game?*

ANTHONY DAVIS: I was discussing it with the trainers and the coaches, just trying to see what the best decision was for me as far as playing, and [my right] shoulder just wasn't ready. I didn't play in the last two games because of the shoulder, and it's still not quite there yet. So I figured I could use

this downtime to get my shoulder right so when I go back to the team, we can try to make this push [for the playoffs].

MD: *Who is the one guy you would say right now is your MVP?*

AD: Either James Harden or Steph Curry. They are playing out of their minds right now. Especially James. He's doing all types of things that you don't normally see, and Steph is scoring

TUNE IN



▶ **EPISODE: FEB. 5**

Patriots running back **Jonas Gray** shares his aspirations to star in the next *Bachelor*



▶ **EPISODE: FEB. 10**

Nine-time Grand Slam winner **Monica Seles** tells why **Serena Williams** is the greatest of all time



▶ **EPISODE: FEB. 12**

SI Swimsuit models **Nina Agdal**, **Gigi Hadid** and **Emily Ratajkowski** talk how social media changed Swimsuit



▶ **EPISODE: FEB. 13**

Former Jazz forward and 14-time NBA All-Star **Karl Malone** tells players to quit resting and play basketball

DANNY BOLLINGER/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (DAVIS); ANTHONY NESMITH/CAL SPORT MEDIA (GRAY); CLIVE BRUNSKILL/GETTY IMAGES (WILLIAMS); JAMES MACARI FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (AGDAL); JOHN W. McDONOUGH/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (MALONE)

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INBOX

FOR FEB. 2, 2015



Thank you, Rich Cohen, for your wonderful article honoring the life of **Ernie Banks**. The C on Banks's cap should stand not only for *Cubs* but also for *class*. Thanks for the memories!

Bob Van Haitisma, Omaha

I was heartbroken when I read about Banks's death. His imprint on the Cubs has never faded, as he steadfastly remained one of the team's—and baseball's—ambassadors of goodwill. Now Mr. Cub has three places to call home: Wrigley Field, Cooperstown and heaven.

Paul Montenegro, Chula Vista, Calif.

It pains me to say this, but **Bill Belichick** is the Richard Nixon of football. Belichick's Patriots are so good that they don't have to break the rules, but they do. Nixon was so far ahead of Democratic presidential nominee George McGovern in 1972 that he didn't need the Watergate break-in to help his reelection campaign, but he was still involved in the cover-up. Paranoia obviously doesn't listen to reason.

Dan Shenk, Goshen, Ind.



I strongly disagree with Tim Layden's assertion that Belichick "failed miserably in his first head-coaching job." In 1991, Belichick took over a Browns team that had finished 3-13. By the '94 season he had the team at 11-5, before a 20-13 victory over the Patriots in an AFC wild-card game. His final year in Cleveland was disrupted by owner Art Modell's announcement that the Browns were moving to Baltimore, after which the team went 1-6.

Collin Agee, Falls Church, Va.

CONTACT
SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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COVER



Richard Sherman claims that Seattle was better than New England as a place to develop his game and persona. Well, I have just one word for him: *Gronk*.

Ken Mann
Fort Lauderdale

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8



LEADING OFF

Despite its being a gag, I cannot believe that with all of the attention on domestic violence and violence against women, you would print a photo of **Will Ferrell** hitting a cheerleader in the face with a basketball.

Tim Shullberg
Long Beach, Calif.

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SCORECARD

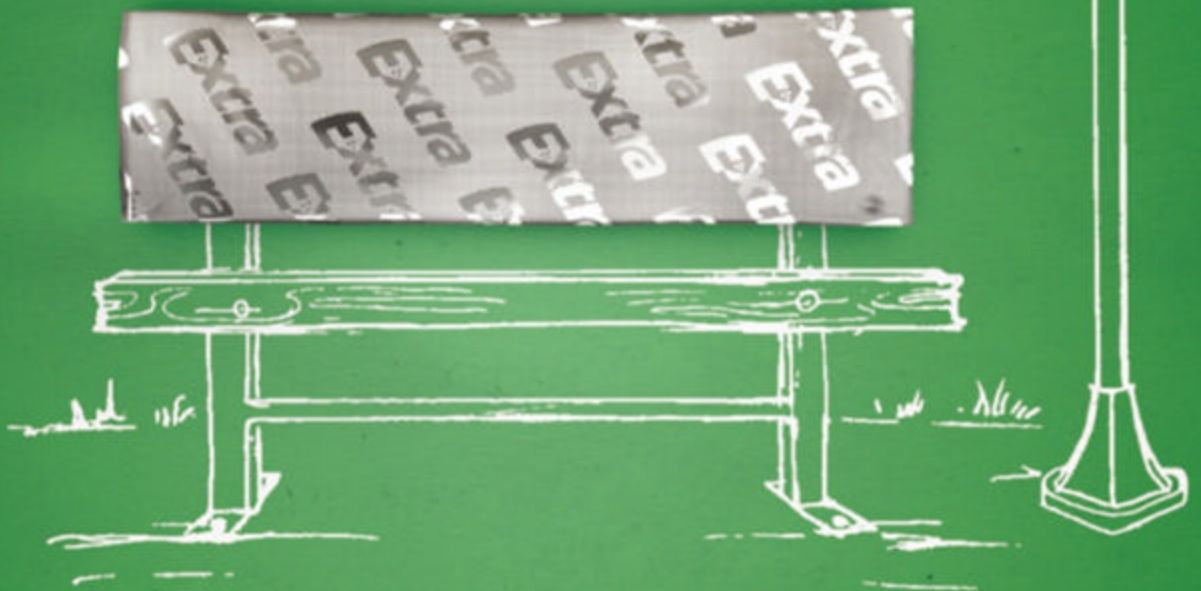
In his *Case for ... Being Awesome*, Joe Sheehan wrote, "It's been too long since baseball had a team that made fans wake up every day and ask, 'Did they win?'" Not true. **Pirates** fans have been asking that question for years, just with increasingly exasperated undertones.

Sara Lemon
Seymour, Ind.



TONY TRILO FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (BANKS); ROBERT REED/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (FERRELL); JEFFREY M. HARRIS/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (SHERMAN); TIM LAYDEN/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (PIRATES); DAVID BERMAN FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (BELICHICK)

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT NOTHING IN PARTICULAR



Sometimes, the little things
last the longest.

give



GET

Extra.





+

1
of
3**Leading
Off**

Fade to Zach

■ Timberwolves rookie guard Zach LaVine took over the spotlight during the NBA Slam Dunk Contest last Saturday in Brooklyn, finishing off a behind-the-back jam for a perfect score of 50. At 19, the 6' 5" LaVine became the event's second youngest champion, after Kobe Bryant, who was 18 when he took the title in 1997.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
**NATHANIEL S.
BUTLER**

NBAE/GETTY IMAGES



FIGHT LIGHT

TS ON  MONTREAL



+

23

**Leading
Off**

Turning Over A Leaf

■ Islanders right wing Colin McDonald plowed defenseman Stephane Robidas into the boards—and almost back onto the Maple Leafs' bench—during New York's 3-2 victory last Thursday in Uniondale, L.I. McDonald, who also assisted on the second goal, helped the Isles maintain their lead in the Metropolitan Division.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
MIKE STOBE
NHLI/GETTY IMAGES





+

33

**Leading
Off**

Too Little, Too Gate

■ Paula Moltzan of the U.S. skied through a gate and was disqualified from her slalom run during the nations team event at the world championships in Beaver Creek and Vail, Colo. Sweden won the quarterfinal round on Feb. 10, but U.S. skiers came away from the two-week competition with five medals—second to Austria's nine—including golds for Ted Ligety (giant slalom) and Mikaela Shiffrin (slalom).

PHOTOGRAPH BY
ALEXIS BOICHARD
AGENCE ZOOM/GETTY
IMAGES

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The Crowd

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Dan Patrick
VINCE CARTER

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Edited by JIM GORANT + TED KEITH

SCORECARD

One Year Later

I've been called a distraction and a hero, an attention seeker and an icon, but I'm still working to earn the label that matters to me most: NFL player

BY MICHAEL SAM

IT'S A LITTLE after 7 a.m. in North Texas, and the sun is just starting to rise.

I've been up for a bit and am getting my things together to head to the Michael Johnson Performance Center in McKinney for another three hours of intense, NFL-caliber training. I've been eating right and pushing myself physically every day since October, when I was last in an NFL locker room. When my phone rings with an opportunity from one of the 32 NFL teams, I'll be ready to come right in and contribute.

Around me this morning are guys in their early 20s preparing for the combine

or upcoming pro days. Watching them work out, I remember the process, and their emotions are very familiar to me. Their journeys, though, will ultimately be very different.


JUST OVER a year ago I told the world what I had known about myself and what my teammates at Mizzou had known for some time: I am a gay man.

I didn't make this announcement for the sake of making history or because I relished the attention that came along with it. Before the start of my senior year I had stood up in front of my teammates and coaches and told them face-to-face

who I was. I felt that those guys were my family. I wanted to be myself with them, and I knew I could trust them. My trust was justified, as I not only remained a teammate and friend but was also a defensive leader during a 12–2 season that ended with a Cotton Bowl win.

If I had it my way, I would have done it the same way with whatever NFL team decided to draft me, but that didn't seem to be possible. Immediately after my senior season, national reporters started asking to tell “my story.” I knew what they meant; they knew what they meant. These requests intensified after the Senior Bowl in January 2014, and





**I'VE BEEN EATING
RIGHT AND PUSHING
MYSELF PHYSICALLY
EVERY DAY SINCE I
WAS LAST IN AN NFL
LOCKER ROOM.**



it was becoming obvious that what was kept in the family at Mizzou was about to get out in a big way before the biggest moment of my football career—the NFL draft.

Deciding to publicly come out is a major moment in every gay person's life, and nobody wants to be outed. The reason I came out in a nationally televised interview was to ensure that I would have a chance to tell my story on my own terms.

I wasn't prepared, nor could I have been, for what happened next. People called me courageous, some even called me a hero, while others told me my announcement gave them inspiration and helped them in their personal journeys. I don't consider myself a hero or courageous. I was just being true to myself, but if that was enough to help some people through a difficult time, then I am very grateful to have been able to do so.

My journey over the last year has had its ups and downs, steps forward and back, but at this time a year ago there was one thing that was very clear in my mind: I was ready to play football.

GROWING UP in Hitchcock, Texas, was damn hard. There were times when I didn't want to go home, or didn't have a place to go to. Playing sports was my salvation during my childhood. I was always

a big kid, and I was born with a natural desire to compete. Trust me when I say that I'm not a good loser. There's a reason I was unofficially voted Least Liked on Game Day while I was at Missouri.

As I grew older, I became fascinated by football. Captivated by it. I wanted nothing more than to play. My mother forbade me from playing. It was against her religion. But I made the decision to strike out on my own path and defy my mom to play this game, and it was the best decision I have ever made. Football has always been a constant, positive force in my life, and many of the greatest experiences of my life have come from the game. Football has been there for me at times when few others have. It's pure and it's good, and it's what I do. I love football.

BY THE time I was drafted by coach Jeff Fisher and the Rams, I was ready to dive in and make an impact for my new team. I didn't know what to expect when I arrived at training camp, but my new teammates ended up being just as supportive as my family at Mizzou. A lot of the veterans welcomed me to the team personally and made me feel like I was just another football player—another rookie, in fact—and that I had better be prepared to be treated like one in the coming weeks.

I never doubted my teammates had my back, but if I needed evidence, it came toward the end

ROBERT BECK/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

of camp in August when a television network ran a questionable segment about my showering habits. My teammates and coaches spoke up for me, but when Chris Long sent his famous tweet informing the network that “everyone but you is over it,” that meant a lot. To see a veteran like Chris publicly get my back is something I will never forget and will always be grateful for.

When I was cut by the Rams at the end of camp, I was devastated but grateful. They made a business decision that I understood, but they also had given me an opportunity to show I could play at the pro level. In four preseason games against guys who ended up playing on Sundays, I had 11 tackles and three sacks.

Not long after I was released by the Rams, the Cowboys gave me the chance to return home to Texas. The life of a practice-squad player is hard. You're expected to learn not only your team's playbook but also the opposing squad's as well, every week. I put my head down and worked hard for the Cowboys, doing everything I was asked—even at times playing offense in practices to simulate opposing teams' formations.

Because I didn't have the benefit of spending all of training camp with the Cowboys, I thought my arrival might be tough. But once again I found a welcoming locker room full of guys who respected me and treated me as part of the team. I learned a lot in Dallas from some of the best in the NFL, such as All-Pro tight end Jason Witten, who used his years of experience blocking pass rushers to teach me some tips on how to get to the quarterback faster.

Unfortunately, as in St. Louis, my time in Dallas ended more quickly than I wanted. There's a reason many veterans say that NFL stands for Not For Long.

THE LAST few months have been difficult for me as a football player. For the first time since I was a kid, I watched a season end from my living room instead of on the field.

Through all the ups and downs, though, I'm focused on getting back on an NFL roster. It's why I get up early every morning and push myself at the gym and why I'm looking to participate in the first-ever veterans combine next month.

As I train with the guys in McKinney, I know they know who I am. I played against some of them in the SEC in the fall of 2013, when I was co-Defensive Player of the Year. I know that when they see me doing sprints or putting up the weight I do, they wonder why I'm not on an NFL roster. Some even say as much.

I don't believe being gay has kept me off an NFL roster, but I will challenge anyone who says I don't have the talent to make it in the league and will continue to push myself every day and do whatever it takes until I can earn another roster spot.

Recently I've been approached by networks about participating in pregame shows or being a guest analyst. I've been asked point-blank why I don't quit football to explore other career opportunities.

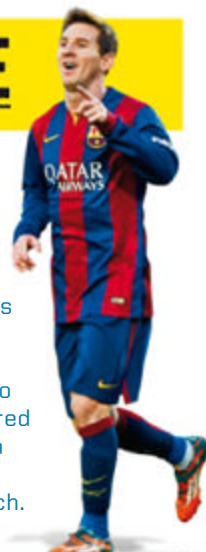
I tell them the same thing every time: I'll give up the game when my legs are broken.

I'm a football player and will keep fighting for my dream to play in the NFL. □

GO FIGURE

23

Career hat tricks in La Liga play for Barcelona's **Lionel Messi**, tying the record set earlier this season by Cristiano Ronaldo of Real Madrid. Messi scored three times on Sunday in a 5-0 win over Levante, his 300th career La Liga match.



1

Win this season for Florida A&M, which became the last Division I men's team to pick up a victory when it beat North Carolina A&T 57-50 last Saturday. The Rattlers started the season 0-23.



356-3

Score of a Feb. 8 rugby match in Belgium in which Soignies lost to Kituro. Soignies planned to protest the result because the referee showed up late for the game, by which time some of its players had gone home.

133

Three-pointers attempted in the NBA All-Star Game, breaking by 33 the record set last year. The East and West combined to make 48 threes, 18 more than last season.

130

Two-pointers attempted in the West's 163-158 win over the East, the highest-scoring All-Star Game ever.



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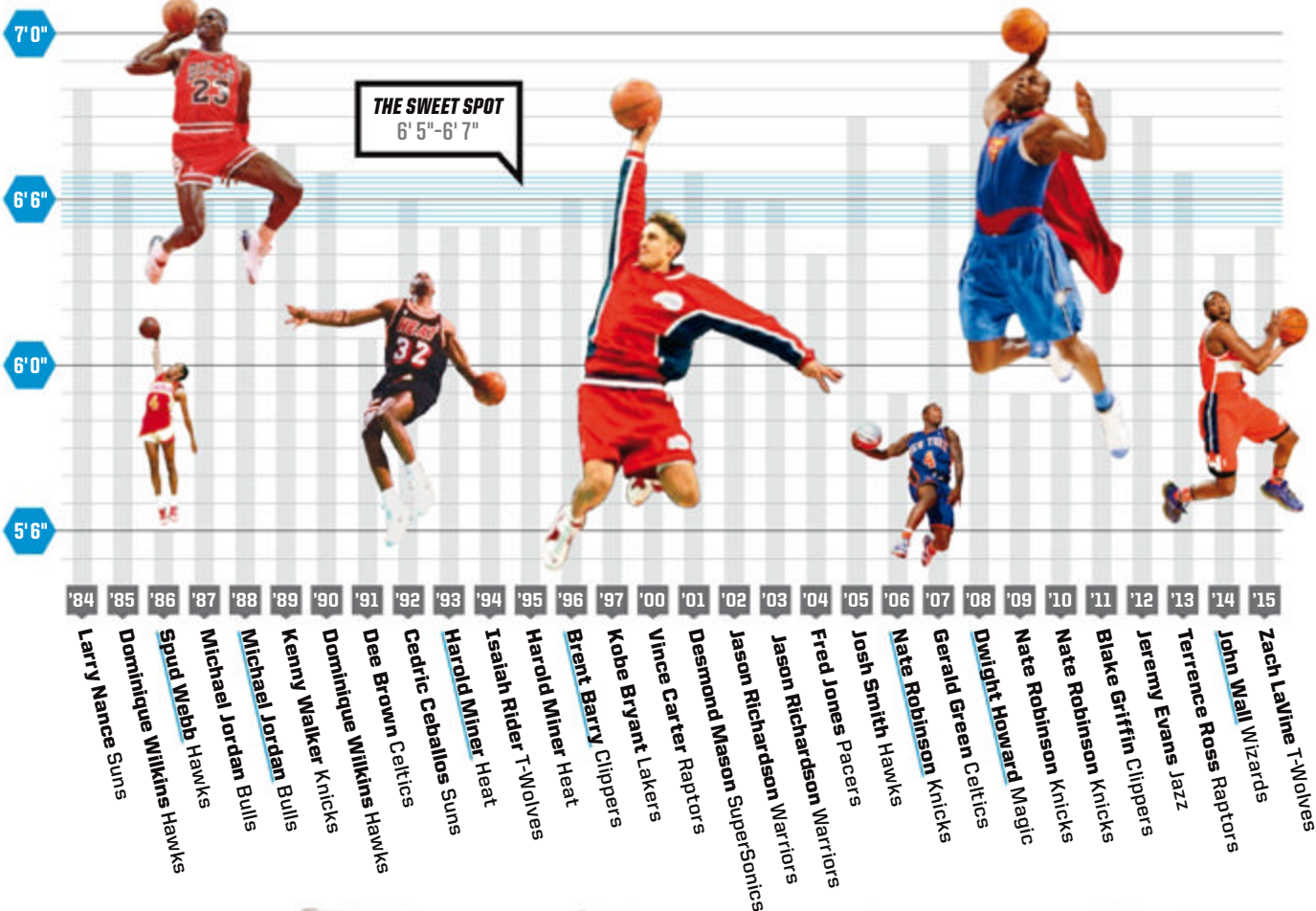
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Making It Look Too Easy

The only time basketball players don't want to be taller

ZACH LAVINE put on a mean performance when he won the NBA Dunk Contest last Saturday: At 6' 5", the T-Wolves' guard matches the average height of the 30 winners since the event was revived in 1984. (It wasn't held in '98 or '99.) Only three previous champions were 6' 5", but 16 have been either 6' 5", 6' 6" or 6' 7". A mere three champs have been 6' 10" or taller, topped by 6' 11" Dwight Howard, while 5' 9" Nate Robinson, a three-time winner, has led the 6' 1" and under crowd to five victories.



Is There Life After Football? Surviving the NFL
by George E. Koonce Jr., et al.
A personal and professional look at the ills of retirees and how to overcome them, by three Ph.D.'s, including one former NFLer. #concussions+



A Baseball Life
by Ronald C. Modra (abaseballlife.com)
The 279 pages of photos take you on the field and in the locker room, covering everyone from Hank Aaron to Bryce Harper. #pitchers&catchers!



Circus Maximus
by Andrew Zimbalist
Numbers can lie, but that doesn't make them any less eye-popping in this economic analysis of hosting global sporting events. #taxabuse



The Fall Line
by Nathaniel Vinton
Well-paced tale of U.S. ski success, with an insider's look at the '14 season including Bode Miller, Lindsey Vonn and gang. #whiteknuckle



BOOKS

**TWEETABLE
REVIEWS**

EXTRA MUSTARD

Look at Me!

Find the phony minor league promos

LAST YEAR MINOR LEAGUE baseball teams held events that celebrated everyone from Johnny Football to Jerry Seinfeld. As the schedules for 2015 promotions start rolling out, it's clear that these quests to grab attention can cross into the surreal. Check out the descriptions below and try to separate the actual promotions from the fake.

	1 Back to the Future Night To celebrate the movie's 30th anniversary, the team will wear jerseys made to look like Marty McFly's vest-and-jean-jacket ensemble while fans enjoy '80s-themed decor, contests and music. A DeLorean will be on display, and anyone born in 1955 or 1985 (the years in which the movie is set) will get in free.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
	2 Mad Men Night As the AMC show kicks off its final season, the team will wear throwback jerseys and give discounts to men who show up in suits and slicked-back hair and women in dresses and white gloves. Vendors will hawk candy cigarettes, drinks will be served in plastic tumblers and there will be an ad slogan contest.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
	3 Brian Williams Pants-on-Fire Night To roast the fallen NBC anchor, during the game a fan named Brian Williams will read tall tales, a pair of pants will be burned and between-innings contests will include To Tell the Truth and Two Truths and a Lie. Anyone in attendance named Brian Williams will have a chance to throw out a ceremonial first pitch.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
	4 Deflategate Night In an homage to the Patriots, the first 1,200 fans will receive inflatable baseballs, with 11 of every 12 getting one that's deflated. There will be discounts on meatball sandwiches and roasted nuts, and there will be deflated hot-air balloon rides at the park. Music will include "Great Balls of Fire" and "Wrecking Ball."	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
	5 Alice in Wonderland Night For the kiddie lit classic's 150th anniversary the team will give a cartoon version of the book to anyone not arriving late, host a tea party during the seventh-inning stretch and invite winners of a Mad Hat contest to play croquet on the field with the Queen of Hearts and the Cheshire Cat.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
	6 Saved by the Bell Night The team will honor the '80s Saturday-morning cult classic with themed jerseys, a pregame "sprain" dance, an oldest cellphone contest and a Screech chess tournament. Anyone named Johnny Dakota will be banned from the ballpark, and fans with perms or stonewashed jeans can run the bases after the game.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>

Key: 1. Real (Gary Hall/Cats); 2. Fake; 3. Real (Akron RubberDucks); 4. Real (Myrtle Beach Pelicans); 5. Fake; 6. Real (Brooklyn Cyclones)

SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE



West Virginia coach Bob Huggins **released security camera images** that showed someone urinating on his house.



BREAKOUT PERFORMER

HOT

Jeff Gordon

He took the pole at Daytona. And you thought all the retirees in Florida drove slow in the left lane with the blinker on.

LeBron James

He's now the first VP of the NBPA, which doesn't roll off the tongue like King.

Carmelo Anthony

Hogs the ball and the post, yet he was shocked Amar'e Stoudemire took a buyout.

Jackie Robinson West

They lost their Little League title over boundary issues. It's not like they were trying to annex Ukraine.

Chris Johnson

The Jets cut him to avoid his \$500,000 bonus. He's gone from CJ2K to CJ-500K.



NOT

THEY SAID IT

"It starts with, the whole give a s--- meter has to be higher."

Peter Horachek

Maple Leafs coach after a 5-4 loss to the Rangers on Feb. 10.



Whitney Osuigwe | *Bradenton, Fla.* | *Tennis*

Whitney, a seventh-grader who studies and trains at IMG Academy, upset No. 1 seed Himari Sato of Japan 6-4, 6-4 to win the 12's division title at the Junior Orange Bowl in Coral Gables. The unseeded Whitney was the only American player to reach a final at the event. She is top ranked in her age group in the Southeast and No. 3 in the U.S.



Harrison Maurus | *Auburn, Wash.* | *Weightlifting*

Harrison, a freshman at Auburn Riverside High, set U.S. 14-to-15 age-group records for the 77-kg weight class in the snatch [118 kg], clean and jerk [145] and total [263] to tie for fifth at junior nationals in Oklahoma City. He finished eighth in the 69-kg weight class in last May's Youth Pan American Games in Lima, Peru.



Jenna Stegmaier | *Garfield Heights, Ohio* | *Basketball*

Jenna, a 5' 10" senior point guard at Cuyahoga Heights High, poured in 23 points in a 52-33 win over Richmond Heights High to break the school's career scoring record of 1,327, set in 1973 by Timberwolves coach Flip Saunders. Through Sunday, Jenna had scored 1,500 points and was averaging 19.0 this season. She will play at Division II Findlay.

FACES IN THE CROWD

Edited By
**ALEXANDRA
FENWICK**



Norris Guscott | *Lynn, Mass.* | *Cricket*

Guscott, 26, a wicket keeper and public health researcher at Harvard's Innovation Lab, took 10 catches [tied for most in the nation this season] and had seven stumpings to help the Harvard Cricket Club win the Ivy League title. He received American College Cricket's John Bart King Award, given to the nation's best U.S.-born player.



Chayse Capps | *Plano, Texas* | *Gymnastics*

Capps, a sophomore at Oklahoma, tied her career best to win the vault [9.950] and took first in the balance beam [9.950]—an event in which she is ranked first nationally—helping the top-rated Sooners defeat Iowa State 198.150-195.675. Oklahoma is the first team since February 2011 to be ranked No. 1 in the NCAA in all four events.



Liam and Declan Conway | *Concord, Ohio* | *Hockey*

Liam and Declan, twins and Ohio Virtual Academy graduates, led Fort Erie of the Greater Ontario Junior Hockey League to a 3-2 shootout win over St. Catharines. Liam made 36 saves, including all three in the shootout. Declan, a forward, scored the game's first goal and the only shootout goal.

Nominate Now ▼

To submit a candidate for Faces in the Crowd, go to SI.com/faces. For more on outstanding amateur athletes, follow [@SI_Faces](https://twitter.com/SI_Faces) on Twitter.

Better team replacement: No.

Better car replacement: Yes.

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Just My Type

→ Interview by **DAN PATRICK**

DAN PATRICK: *Did you ever feel bad for somebody you dunked on?*

VINCE CARTER: Former teammates and friends, maybe. When it comes to the legends of shot blocking, not at all. Those were like dreams come true for me. You watch them growing up, and then all of a sudden you're like, Man, I just dunked on Alonzo Mourning or Dikembe Mutombo.

DP: *But when you're great at one thing, did you want to prove you could do more?*

VC: Absolutely.

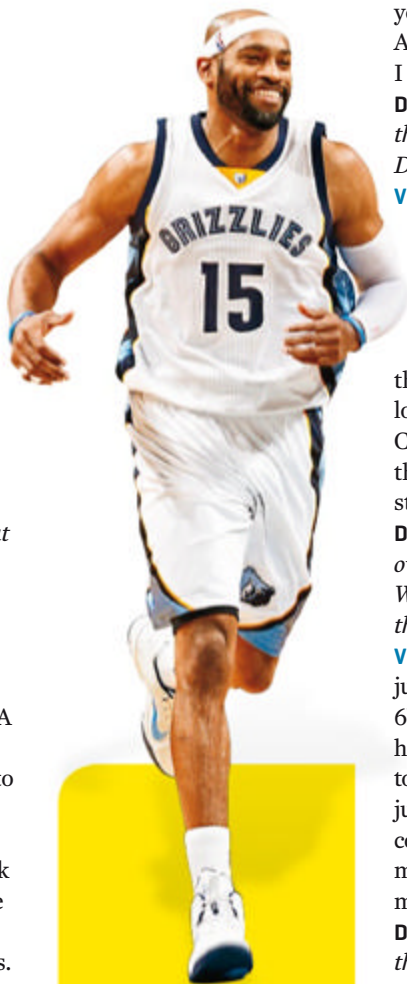
DP: *Was that proving you could score in other ways?*

VC: You first get in the NBA and you want to let the world see what you bring to the table. I had the ability to dunk. So a dream of mine was to be in the dunk contest and show all of the stuff I had stored in my head for many, many years. And then I was like, Oh, yeah, by the way, I can do some other things as well.

DP: *Similar to Michael Jordan. He was a dunker and wanted to prove he had an all-around game.*

VC: It was a little more for him. He wanted to show the world he was the greatest ever. [Laughs.]

DP: *How did Dean Smith close you to come to North Carolina?*



VINCE CARTER

THE MIGHTY DUNKS

The 38-year-old Grizzlies forward can't soar as he used to—especially with his left-foot injury—but his flying feats in the 2000 Slam Dunk Contest and his Olympic jam that year are still considered among the greatest.

VC: "I'm Dean Smith and you're a good player and we'd like to offer you a scholarship."

Anything besides that I didn't really hear.

DP: *How was Dean Smith the person different from Dean Smith the coach?*

VC: He was very shy. He didn't like people saying, "Dean Smith and the Tar Heels." He couldn't stand when you dunked the ball to try to pump the crowd up. He said it looks like you're saying, Cheer for me. My first year, that's one of the things he stopped me from doing.

DP: *How did you jump over French center Frédéric Weis's head and dunk in the 2000 Olympics?*

VC: I never thought I could jump over a man who was 6' 4", much less 7' 2". I get home a month later and tried to re-create that situation and jump over a 6' 4" guy and couldn't do it. I almost hurt myself and him. It was just the moon and stars were lined up.

DP: *But still, how did that happen?*

VC: Every time I see it to this day, I shake my head and say, How? I look at me now and I don't know if I'm jumping over a 5' 5" person.

DP: *How much longer are you going to play?*

VC: Going back to Coach Smith, he taught us to respect the game. When you lose the love and passion for going to work, that's when you start disrespecting the game. □

Guest Shots Say What?



Dale Earnhardt Jr. explained how

drivers push the rules to the limits. "We have a rule book, and it's our job or the crew chief's job to bend that rule book as far as it'll go without breaking it," Earnhardt said. "To be competitive, you have to use every thousandth of a second and every measurement that NASCAR allows." ...



James Worthy talked about how

difficult it is for NBA stars to be patient with less talented players: "I remember pulling Magic Johnson to the side [when Johnson was the Lakers' coach]. I was like, You're Magic. Anthony Peeler might take three years to



learn what you do in a week." ... I asked

Michael Irvin about the best offer he got during his college recruiting process. "A recruiter was driving me home in a Camaro," Irvin said. "I said, 'This is a nice car.' He said, 'It's yours. All you gotta do is sign.'"

GET TO KNOW

THE UNKNOWN



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THE BULLS' JIMMY BUTLER

THE REVAMPED WARRIORS

THE ROCKETS' JAMES HARDEN



IN HIS OWN SWEET TIME

When James Harden signed with the Rockets, he wasn't sure he had what it takes to be a star. Now he's the MVP front-runner, and the league is trying to keep up, step for Eurostep

BY LEE JENKINS



Photograph by
Robert Seale
For Sports Illustrated

TOWER OF STRENGTH

The league's leading scorer, Harden has taken a playoff bubble team and turned it into a title contender.



THE PRIVATE PLANE that transported James Harden into Texas on the morning of Oct. 28, 2012, was silent except for the muffled beats leaking from his chunky headphones. He sat suspended in the soupy air between Oklahoma City and Houston, the NBA Finals and the lottery, the bench and the marquee. Behind him was the only professional home he'd ever known, stable and secure, with strong friendships and guaranteed success. Ahead lay a teeming city that he compared with a desert island, a land of opportunity spiked with expectation, where he would either build a new community or languish trying. He had just spent the summer on the U.S. Olympic team, with Thunder runningmates Kevin Durant and Russell Westbrook, fantasizing about the championships they seemed destined to capture. *What do I do now?* Harden asked himself. He was going from sixth man on a budding dynasty to leading man on a bubble team. His safety net, once as wide as Durant's wingspan, had vanished. "I felt like I was by myself," he says.

Memories of that flight, and the several days that followed, are as hazy as the view out his plane window. The black SUV, waiting at William P. Hobby Airport, to ferry him downtown; the conference room at Toyota Center, where club executives told him, "We've been looking for you"; a deep breath; the arena floor, ringed by more than 3,000 people, who turned a regularly scheduled fan appreciation event into a tent revival; another deep breath; his first practice as a Rocket, when he instructed new teammates to tuck in their shirttails, ignoring their sideways glances; the opener in Detroit, where he signed a five-year, \$80 million contract extension less than an hour before tip-off, then hung 37 points on the Pistons. The team's general manager, seated near press row at The Palace, declared a few decibels louder than he intended: "That's why we f----- got this guy!"

That GM, Daryl Morey, had pursued Harden for three years and mined a plethora of statistics that indicated he would be a megastar. A point guard by nature and a shooting guard by trade, the 6' 5" Harden excelled at almost every offensive element prized in today's NBA: orchestrating the pick-and-roll; getting to the rim; getting to the free throw line; creating and making three-pointers, especially the corner threes. But there is still no way to project whether even the finest part-timer can sustain such performance for 40 minutes over 82 nights against an array of bespoke traps and double teams. So when Morey sent Kevin Martin, Jeremy Lamb, two first-round draft picks and a second-rounder to Oklahoma City for a package headlined by Harden, the GM was betting that a star lurked inside. And when Harden boarded the jet for Houston, having rejected a contract from the Thunder that fell \$6 million shy of the maximum, he was making the same bet.

I'm talented, but what if I'm not talented enough? Harden asked himself. I'm smart, but what if I'm not smart enough? Then he eviscerated the Pistons, and two nights later put 45 on the Hawks, and some of his uncertainty evaporated. He made his first All-Star team that season, recorded his first triple double, had career highs in almost every category. But Houston finished eighth in the Western Conference, OKC first, and the Thunder took their first-round matchup 4-2. "I still had Oklahoma City in my head," Harden says. "Did I make the right decision? Was it my fault? They were still winning. It felt like they didn't need me anymore." Scoring and playmaking came naturally to Harden, but a star's other duties did not.

Two years and four months have passed since the



"I see an opportunity to become one of the best players in the world," Harden says. "I could be the best player in the world."

trade, and Harden is now a 25-year-old supernova, not only the most prolific scorer in the NBA and one of the most productive passers, but suddenly a stopper and a leader to boot. "Our best player since Hakeem Olajuwon," says Rockets owner Leslie Alexander. Houston sits tied for third in the West, Oklahoma City ninth. The Thunder did need him after all. "I still think a lot about the ifs," Harden says. "But I'm good now." A star does not reminisce about former employers who withheld max contracts. He haunts them without remorse. Welcome to the year of the Beard, the Mohawk and the Step Daddy, the year that slow became fast, that Compton became Euro, and that drawing a foul became an art form.

Houston has unleashed what Morey calls "the mod-



BEYOND THE BEARD

Though his bewhiskered mien is instantly recognizable, Harden says, “Sometimes I want to rip it off and be a kid again.”

easy,” Motiejunas says, “because he gets us so open.”

When Harden is rolling, he twirls his left index finger, like an egg beater on the fastest setting. “That means something’s cooking,” says his housemate and former high school teammate Greg Howell. It could be a number of specialties: one of his four variations on the Eurostep or his lurching straight-line drive or his super-slo-mo “step-back of death,” so named by teammate Jason Terry because the move leaves defenders staggering as if they’ve been shot. It could also be another leisurely stroll to the stripe. Harden invites abuse, stretching his body and extending the ball when he approaches the rim, baiting opponents to reach and slap. He proudly displays the scabs along his forearms. He jokes about affixing name tags of his assailants, who have helped shove

ern player,” an exemplar of efficiency who actually scored 45 points in a game this season on 18 shots, a line that sounds mathematically impossible. Harden averages 27.4 points, but more impressive, accounts for a league-high 44.2 when including his assists. If Morey built a player’s operating system, it would perform a lot like Harden, who turns up his nose at midrange jumpers while generating foul shots and corner threes at remarkable rates. “If I knew then what I know now,” Morey says, “I’d have given up five more first-round picks.” Never mind that Harden’s supposed sidekick, center Dwight Howard, has already missed 21 games and is out another four to six weeks with a right-knee injury. The Rockets survive with a starting front line of Joey Dorsey and Donatas Motiejunas. “James makes it

him into the stratosphere previously occupied by Durant and LeBron James. “I see an opportunity to become one of the best players in the world,” Harden says. “I could be the best player in the world.”

Fans look at the overgrown beard and expect a similarly outsized personality, but Harden must be comfortable to reveal it. He often speaks in a convoluted lexicon that no one outside his inner circle can decipher. A standard salutation is “Woowoo.” Goodbye is “Curtains.” Harden is protective of the beard—not even his barber trims the stray whiskers—but he is also weary of the attention it commands. He can’t exactly slip on a baseball cap and disappear. “Sometimes I want to rip it off and be a kid again and hang around quietly,” Harden says. Brand managers everywhere would go ballistic. “To be honest,” he adds, “I’m scared of what I’d look like without it.” Then again, he notices the suspicious glances he receives, and experiences a different kind of fear. “People think I’m mean,” he says. “But if you spend some time around me, get to know me, you fall in love.”



MONJA WILLIS raised three kids as a single mother in South Los Angeles, but James is the youngest by eight years, so he was easily mistaken for an only child. Willis lost two brothers in 1993, murdered in unrelated events, and after that she saw danger around every corner. When James grew old enough to explore his neighborhood, Willis rented out their house and bought a mobile home in a gated park in Rancho Dominguez, on the Compton border; most residents were senior citizens who complained about the noise when James rolled his portable hoop into the street.

Harden arrived at powerful Artesia High a set shooter and little else. “I just stood in the corner,” he says. “I didn’t dribble. I didn’t move. I didn’t do anything. I was lazy, really lazy.” He came with a recommendation from Derrick Cooper, president of the L.A. City Wildcats, who met Harden when he was a kindergartner trying out for an AAU team of 12- and 13-year-olds. “He was small, obviously, and not that fast,” Cooper remembers. “But when the big kids tried to double him and steal the ball, he understood how to kick it out and set up an open shot. He knew the game.”

Scott Pera, then the Artesia coach, recognized in Harden the same instincts that Cooper did. “Great athletes learn to play in the air,” Pera says. “James learned to play on the ground. He knew how to jump stop, how to pump fake, how to see time and space.”



“I like to be in my own world, at my own pace,” Harden says. “Once I know what’s happening around me, then I can attack.”

To turn Harden from a sniper into a driver, Pera put him through daily X-out drills, in which Harden had to convert eight straight layups while Pera punished him with an arm pad. They made a standing bet: If Harden shot more than six free throws in a game, Pera owed him a hamburger; if Harden shot fewer than six, he owed Pera sprints. Harden discovered ways to contort his limbs through and around defenders, collecting whistles and patties. “He played like he was 30,” says Frank Burlison, who covered Artesia for the Long Beach *Press-Telegram* and now runs the scouting service Burlison on Basketball.

Harden’s mother was his motivation. Willis worked 28 years as a maintenance administrator for AT&T, commuting up the congested 110 North to Pasadena, then returning to help care for her own mom, who was dying of cancer. Willis earned enough to afford the mortgage and utilities, spending anything left over on cold cuts, ramen and milk.



A luxury was a membership at L.A. Fitness, the health club where she exercised while her son joined pickup games with middle-aged men.

He developed a playing style that matched his disposition. “I like to be in my own world, at my own pace,” Harden explains. “Once I’m comfortable, once I know what’s happening around me, then I can attack.” When he dribbles atop the key, he looks as if he might nod off, and when he drives through the lane, he slams the brakes more than a cabbie at rush hour. He gets where he needs to be. He just takes a while, and occasionally, he requires a little push.

Midway through his junior season at Artesia, Harden was taking as few as eight shots per game, and Pera begged him to let fly. From then on he was the best high school prospect in Southern California, more acclaimed than contemporaries such as Westbrook and Klay Thompson, Kawhi Leonard and Paul George. As a freshman at Arizona State, Harden was again reluctant to fire, until coaches gave him their approval. A year later he was an All-America, picked third in the 2009 draft by Oklahoma City. Keeping with his pattern, Harden failed to crack double figures as an NBA rookie, deferring to Durant and Westbrook. But he adjusted again, mastering Manu Ginóbili’s Eurostep in one summer and mimicking Paul Pierce’s step-back in another. Harden expanded on the originals—“Step Daddy,” he calls a new version of Pierce’s move—while discovering another maneuver all his own.



MOST VALUABLE PREDICTIONS

Stephen Curry and James Harden both have strong cases for the MVP award this season—but strong enough to beat out LeBron James? Even after his rough start, you can't write off the King

BY CHRIS MANNIX



THE MVP RACE is headlined by two significantly improved candidates. But with two-plus months to go, they will not only battle each other but also a familiar face poised to make a late charge.

Stephen Curry's transition from All-Star to MVP front-runner, from crowd-pleasing gunner to the man poised to surpass LeBron James as the best player in basketball, has little to do with his prolific shooting. Yes, the Warriors' 26-year-old point guard is still lethal from the perimeter, and he's connecting on 48.1% of his attempts, including 39.9% from beyond the three-point line. His offensive outbursts

HOT IN CLEVELAND

James entered the race by taking the Cavs on a 14-2 run before the break.

have become routine: 40 points against the Heat in November, 34 against the Pelicans in December; 51 against the Mavericks in February. Curry's quick release, flawless form and

seemingly limitless range make him the league's most explosive scorer. But it's his evolution into a James-like complete player over the last two seasons that has rocketed him to the head of the class. Curry ranks among the best playmakers (7.9 assists per game, fifth in the league), with as many 30-point, 15-assist games since the start of last season (five) as the rest of the NBA combined. Curry also leads the league in steals per game (2.2) and has made noticeable improvements in his on-ball defense. "He's been much better the last two years," says a scout. "He's always had fast hands and smarts; it's the consistent effort that has changed."

Curry's chief competition, Rockets guard James Harden, has made a similar transformation. In recent years his defense had become a punch line, his indifference immortalized on Vines, YouTube clips and Instagram. (In September, Nuggets guard Ty Lawson posted a Photoshopped image of Harden wearing a Cowboys headset during Dallas's season-opening blowout loss, calling him the "Cowboys defensive coordinator.") This season Harden, the NBA's leading scorer, is eighth in defensive win shares and second in the NBA in steals. With the off-season addition of defense-minded forward Trevor Ariza, a more dedicated Harden has helped Houston move into the top 10 in defensive efficiency, where the Rockets could finish for the first time in his three seasons there.

Still, Curry or Harden will have to wrestle the hardware from four-time MVP James, who incredibly has vaulted back into the race. After a rocky start, the Cavaliers won 14 of 16 games heading into the All-Star break, with James, following his return from a left knee injury, averaging 27.6 points (on 49.1% shooting) and 6.7 assists.

Ultimately the award could come down to team success: Since 1989 every MVP has come from a team that finished either first or second in its conference. That's why James, citing Golden State's NBA-best 42-9 record at the All-Star break, recently declared Curry to be the leading candidate. But if Cleveland's ascent in the Eastern Conference continues in the second half, the improved games of Curry and Harden may not matter; the King will reign again. □



"Oklahoma City taught us to chin the ball, so when you lay it up, no one can strip it," Harden recalls. "I did that for a while, but it didn't work for me, so I started putting the ball out instead. People kept reaching for it and hitting my arm. It was like finding treasure, finding gold. Everyone thinks I'm looking for contact, but I'm not. It's bait on a hook. You have the option to reach for the ball. But if you get my arm, it's a foul." This may not sound like a revelatory technique, but Harden has 127 more free throws and 125 more attempts than anybody in the NBA this season.

His entire offensive approach is counterintuitive. When he wants to shake his man, he slows down. When he wants to protect the ball, he sticks it out. "He's a boxer," Terry says, "getting you off balance, luring you into a mistake and then going right at it." In 2012, Terry played for the Mavericks, who were defending their title in a first-round series against OKC. "It wasn't about stopping KD," he remembers. "It wasn't about keeping Russ out of the lane. It was, 'What do we do with James Harden?'"

Three years after Morey started his pursuit for Harden—Houston feverishly tried to acquire the No. 4 pick from the Kings in 2009—he called Oklahoma City. Morey was searching for a cornerstone, and the only ones available either weren't cornerstones anymore or weren't cornerstones yet. The Thunder seemed to have two ways they could go with Harden: They could give him the maximum deal he sought, exceed the salary cap and pay the luxury tax for a clean look at multiple championships. Or they could do nothing, let him become a restricted free agent the following summer and decide then whether to match what would likely be a max offer sheet. They chose a third option, proposing a contract below the max in hope that Harden would accept it. But by the fall of '12 he had found his elusive comfort zone and felt ready to attack. He just needed that little push.

On Oct. 27, Morey watched his son's soccer game from inside his car, a vantage point that allows him to writhe in private. "All the way to the end I thought they'd pay James the max," Morey says. "I did not think they'd move him." Oklahoma City extended a final four-year, \$54 million offer and gave Harden an hour to mull it over. "I'm not the kind of guy who makes quick decisions," he says. "I had to go too fast, way too fast." The next morning he was on the plane.

WILLIS HAS FOLLOWED her son from California to Arizona, Oklahoma to Texas, and everywhere they move she carries a note he wrote to her in the ninth grade. In it Harden asks for a couple of dollars so he can buy a snack after school, but that's not why Willis framed it. At the bottom is a bold prediction: "P.S. I'm going to be a star."

In the NBA everybody wants to be the face of the franchise, but few want to fulfill the responsibilities. Besides the points and assists,

which can never wane, there are alphas to defend and appearances to make, team meetings to call and free agents to recruit. "I had to figure out how to be the main guy," Harden says.

During his first two years in Houston he came across as slightly aloof, ducking out after practices and skipping treatment sessions. "I was being lazy, being tired, wanting to just go home and relax," Harden says. "I let my body wear down." He threw all his energy into offense, because that's what he thought the team needed, and slipped badly on the other end. "I put defense on the back burner," he admits.

Morey believed the Rockets could contend this season if Harden became a two-way player, but no one knew how to accelerate the process, and rushing him is risky. "To get there," says coach Kevin McHale, "you have to go through some stuff." One of McHale's former assistants, Kelvin Sampson, worked daily with Harden over the past two years. "He'll do it," Sampson said, "when he decides it's important."

Pera, Harden's former high school coach, moved to Houston last summer after he landed an assistant's job at Rice and stayed in Harden's guest house for seven weeks. One night Pera asked about the upcom-



Morey believed Harden could be a two-way player, but no one knew how to accelerate the process, and rushing him is risky. "To get there," says McHale, "you have to go through some stuff."

ing season. "LeBron, KD, the best of the best, they play both ends," Harden said. "I've got to do it too."

First, he had to prepare his body. He went home to Los Angeles and hiked in Runyon Canyon, ran the dunes in Manhattan Beach, took spin classes at Cycle House. He joined pickup games in L.A. and also at the University of Houston, where Sampson is now the coach. "He is treating every possession like the playoffs," one Cougar reported. Sampson wondered if his star pupil had made the decision.

On Aug. 7, Harden was sitting in the parking lot of a Houston bank when news flashed on his phone: Du-



rant was withdrawing from Team USA in advance of the FIBA World Cup. “I’m going to be alone,” Harden told Howell. “Maybe I should drop out too and get some rest.” He could kick back and roll a few hundred more frames at Bowlmor, where he is so prolific they gave him his own pin to take home. “Are you joking?” Howell asked. “This is the best thing that could have happened. LeBron’s not there, KD’s not there. It’s your time to lead.” Howell provided the final push. In Spain, Harden was the one who huddled teammates when opponents were making a run, and Harden was the one who spoke when coaches asked for players’ opinions. “The way he practiced, the way he was in meetings, he’s grown quite a bit,” says Bulls coach Tom Thibodeau, a Team USA assistant. “He led us.”

Harden will never be the loudest voice in the locker room—especially not a locker room with Dwight Howard—but from the courtside seats at Toyota Center his mother can hear him getting in the ears of Patrick Beverley and Josh Smith and Trevor Ariza. She remembers how coaches used to ask her why he wouldn’t take charge. *Go to work*, she’d have to tell him. “He’s like a different person,” Willis says. Predictably, Harden tops the NBA in win shares this season, but he also ranks eighth in defensive win shares and second in steals. He is locking down despite the departures of Chandler Parsons and Jeremy Lin, whose exits left Houston even more reliant on Harden.

MIX MASTER

Harden gets by defenders with his change of pace, gets to the rim with his Eurostep and gets to the line by extending his shooting arm.

“You never take anything away from LeBron, but it’s similar in what we’re asking [Harden] to carry,” says Rockets assistant J.B. Bickerstaff. Houston is looking for another creator to help, but so far Harden is handling the triple teams and full-court denials sent his way. “Let’s say an opponent is showing hard on a pick-and-roll, and I beat it three or four times, they’ll switch it up and trap me,” he explains. “So I go to

my big and I tell him, ‘I’m going to hit you with the pocket pass, and you either [pass] to the corner or attack and find another big.’”

It is sheer coincidence, Harden claims, that he creates so many layups, free throws and corner threes at a time when front offices are trumpeting the value of those actions. “How I always liked to play,” he says. It is also coincidence, Harden insists, that he Eurosteps across the floor at a time when coaches are hailing the fundamentals of European imports. “Good way to move without dribbling,” he says. And it is yet another coincidence, Harden maintains, that he sprouted the billowing beard in college, at a time when hipsters from Brooklyn to Berkeley were about to put away their razors. “I didn’t want to shave,” he says. Anybody who believes all that is underestimating his mysterious genius.

“I do feel like I can see some things before they happen,” Harden admits. His vision, from the sky over the state line, has come into focus: A sixth man as the new superstar, a desert island as the new destination, emerging with a whistle and a *woowoo*. □



THE RIGHT STEPH

Curry's scoring average may be down a hair from last season, but the point guard is taking smarter, higher-percentage shots, with fans awarding him more 2015 All-Star votes than any other player.



WARRIORS COME OUT TO PLAY

One-dimensional and one-and-done last postseason, Golden State has morphed into a multifaceted favorite this year. The catalyst? Start with that bony, spiky-haired coach

BY CHRIS BALLARD

Photograph by
Greg Nelson
For Sports Illustrated

THE GIANT in the yellow T-shirt lumbers across the concrete floor, advancing on his target.

It's a Wednesday evening in late January, in the cavernous underbelly of Oracle Arena, minutes before the first-place Warriors are to host the Rockets. Golden State's primary owner, Joe Lacob, has just finished speaking to a bunch of venture capitalists in North Face vests. Straddling a stool in a private room, the 59-year-old held forth on penciling profits and leveraging assets and the general awesomeness of Steph Curry—but now he's headed toward his courtside seat. Before he can get far, however, the giant intercepts him, bellowing, "Thank you, Joe!"

Lacob peers up and recognizes the looming figure of Bill Walton, whose son Luke is a Warriors assistant. "Thank you!" Walton shouts a second time, pumping Lacob's hand. "Thank you for everything you've done!"

Lacob smiles nervously. "It feels weird when people say that," he says. "We haven't accomplished anything yet."

"But you have!" booms Walton, becoming serious. "You've changed

everything. You've made people believe again."

For decades, this was a franchise that took and took from its fans while providing little in return. But no one expected change to come this quickly. Five years ago, when Lacob and Peter Guber bought the team for \$450 million, Golden State was coming off a stretch of 14 losing seasons in 16 years. The roster was riddled with D-Leaguers. The previous owner, the reclusive Chris Cohan, was loathed by fans, who blamed him for the team's misfortunes. The coach, Don Nelson, in his final melancholy iteration, was already daydreaming about his beachfront home in Maui.

And now? Now, the Warriors are riding a 107-game sellout streak. At points this season, they've had the top-ranked offense *and* defense. Their core is young and talented, their assistant coaching staff experienced, their owner committed. Their executives earned *SportsBusiness Journal's* Team of the Year award in 2014.

Which leads to the question that all of the NorthFacers want answered: How, in just five years and without a draft pick higher than No. 6, did Golden State go from a joke franchise to one of the best in all of sports?

The answer is about basketball and business, of course, but ultimately it's about people. It involves a prideful pastor and a reclamation project, a spindly point guard and a versatile power forward, an impatient millionaire and a UCLA walk-on. And, in perhaps the most crucial role this spring, a professor's son with a knack for diplomacy.

AT 49, STEVE KERR still looks more like a YMCA All-Star than an NBA player, all elbows and spiky blond hair. In his years with the Bulls and the Spurs, Kerr was the guy you figured you might be able to take on a good day. Skinny, short, bereft of hops. And yet somehow, magically, he won five titles, earned the trust of Michael Jordan and retired as the game's most accurate three-point shooter.

As a coach, Kerr can give off a similar vibe: The Guy Who Just Got Lucky. He merely inherited a great team, Kerr tells you. *Don't talk to me, talk to my assistants—they're the ones doing the real work.* This story? Kerr doesn't want it to be about him. Really, he says, there are more relevant things to write about.

Sorry, Steve. Not going to happen. Because there's one major difference between last year's team, which finished 51–31 before losing to the Clippers in the first round of the playoffs, and this year's team, which entered the All-Star break with the best record in the NBA (42–9). And that difference looks a lot like a bony, spiky-haired YMCA All-Star.

Kerr had always planned on coaching, but it wasn't until two years ago, when he was calling games for TNT, that he began preparing in earnest. That sum-



mer he attended a sports leadership conference at the Aspen Institute in Colorado and ran into Jeff Van Gundy, whose work he admired. Van Gundy told Kerr what he tells all aspiring coaches: Write down everything. Everything you've learned, everything you want to do, everything you'd change. It'll organize your thoughts. Develop your philosophy.

So Kerr created a Word file on his laptop. Some days he added a few notes, other days he filled pages. During four years of college and 15 seasons in the NBA, Kerr had played for Lute Olson, Lenny Wilkens, Phil Jackson and Gregg Popovich; his teammates had included Mark Price, Jordan, Scottie Pippen and Tim Duncan. There was a lot to draw on. He jotted down offensive sets and defensive philosophies, but also minutiae like a policy for families traveling on the road.

Kerr began collecting plays too, pausing the flat-screen in his San Diego home whenever he saw an action he liked—a backdoor lob off an inbound or a particularly potent flare screen. Then he'd shoot an email to Kelly Peters, a coach at Torrey Pines High (and now a Warriors advance scout) who pulled the footage and compiled it using iMovie. Week by week, Kerr's file—named ATOs, for After Timeouts—grew.

By the spring of 2014 that video library had swelled to more than 50 plays and the Word file had grown into a detailed Power Point presentation. Kerr loved broadcasting, just as he'd enjoyed playing. But friends believed that coaching was, in the words of Bruce Fraser, a Golden State assistant who's been close to Kerr since the two played together at Arizona, “his calling.” With two of Kerr's three children already in college, it was time.

The plan was simple and seemingly foolproof: Kerr would follow his mentor, Phil Jackson, to New York. But then the Warriors, coming off a second straight playoff appearance, did something completely unexpected: They fired Mark Jackson.

San Francisco Chronicle columnist Bruce Jenkins, the dean of Bay Area sportswriters, saw the axing as a “risky gamble,” calling Lacob “meddling” and “pathetic.” “I don't buy this notion that, with a new coach, these same Warriors reach the NBA Finals next year,” wrote Jenkins. “Zero chance of that.”

Lacob conducted a high-powered coaching search and, last May, offered the job to Kerr who, after consulting with Popovich, broke Phil Jackson's heart. In the end, the Warriors offered a better roster, greater proximity to Kerr's family and a stronger organizational structure. Expectations were simultaneously high and low. *You'd better win at least 51 games . . . but we doubt you'll do much better.*

To find success, Kerr knew he needed buy-in. He began with the most important man in the franchise.

OF THE 15 players on Golden State's roster, it is strange to think that 26-year-old point guard Steph Curry is now the longest-tenured. And still, he has seen so much already: A glimpse of Nellieball. A lost season under Keith Smart. So many ankle braces.

Curry didn't hit his stride until 2012–13, one year after the Warriors hired Mark Jackson. As a point guard, Jackson had catered to his team's star, setting up Patrick Ewing and Reggie Miller. As a coach, he did

KERR-PLUNK

The Warriors' new leader has curried favor with his star by showing humility—but he's also drawing up plays for Thompson (right), and that's been a boon.



the same. He encouraged Curry to run endless pick-and-rolls, to launch off-balance shots. The rest of the Warriors? Often their job was to set screens for Steph. Or feed Steph. Or guard the opponent's point guard while Jackson hid Curry on one of the worst offensive players. That strategy worked in at least one important respect: Curry improved. He was allowed to make mistakes, and his confidence grew. He became an All-Star.

And Golden State evolved as a team. A pastor at a non-denominational church in Reseda, Calif., Jackson had a knack for fostering an us-against-them mentality. To this day, the Warriors still exit each huddle yelling, “Just us!”, a unifying chant that began in the Jackson era.

Jackson was the right man at the right time. In many respects, though, he was the wrong man for the long run.

GOLDEN STATE GM Bob Myers looks younger than his 39 years. Tall and lanky, with a thatch of dark hair and big eyes, he has both the physical presence of a former athlete—he walked on at UCLA—and the social acumen of an agent, which he was for 14 years.

From the beginning, Myers and Lacob followed a plan that revolved around a few key tenets. First, they valued length, size and versatility, believing that traditional positions were irrelevant. Second, contrary to recent trends, they believed that big men still mattered. Third, they held that organizations flourished



“I don’t buy this notion that, with a new coach, these same Warriors reach the NBA Finals,” wrote one skeptical columnist. “Zero chance of that.”



when stocked with high-character people. Their motto became *Size, then character*. They had an advantage already; in Curry they had their own tiny Duncan. “It’s like having a CEO that exhibits the highest character,” says Myers. “Everybody else falls in line.”

In March 2012 the Warriors traded guard Monta Ellis, their most popular player but a redundancy next to Curry, to the Bucks for center Andrew Bogut, an elite defensive center. They drafted one long positionless wing after another—Klay Thompson (6’ 7”), Harrison Barnes (6’ 8”), Draymond Green (6’ 7”)—and hit on a surprising number of them. They acquired Andre Iguodala (6’ 6”) from the Nuggets while unloading the bloated salary of Andris Biedrins.

By last spring Lacob’s five-year plan was ahead of schedule. Golden State had the talent and the mind-set. There was just one more move to make.

DURING KERR’S three-hour interview last May, many things impressed Golden State’s decision makers. The Power Point presentation, which by then ran 16 pages (beginning with a section titled “Why I’m ready to be a head coach” and followed by proposals for a team dietician, yoga instructor, sleep specialist), was one of them. The meticulous plan Kerr had for each Warrior was another. But what sealed it, at least for Lacob, was Kerr’s list of potential assistants. At the top, along with David Blatt (now the Cavaliers’ coach), were Alvin Gentry and Ron Adams, two of the NBA’s top strategists. Here was a man who wouldn’t feel threatened by those around him.

This, in the end, had been a large part of Jackson’s undoing. Upon joining Golden State he’d instituted a rule forbidding assistant coaches from talking to the press. Even so, assistant Mike Malone received credit for the team’s improved defense, angering Jackson (who declined to comment for this story). Within the team, Jackson pitted players against one another to gain loyalty. “He’d say, ‘You’re my guy, and so-and-so is a clown,’” recalls one insider. “Then he’d say the same thing to the other player, only reversed.”

When Jackson became frustrated with Malone’s growing profile he gave the defense to someone he could trust,

Darren Erman, a low-level assistant who had no experience running an NBA defense. That Erman’s D thrived was fortuitous.

Last spring, things got downright strange. In March, Jackson reassigned Brian Scalabrine, a well-liked assistant, to Golden State’s D-League affiliate; in April, Erman was fired for violating team policy. (Jackson cited “disrespect” in Scalabrine’s demotion; Erman was reported to have secretly recorded team meetings.) Players became wary of publicly crediting assistants, lest they incur Jackson’s wrath. Meanwhile, the Warriors were heading into the postseason with a *total* of 15 years of coaching experience.

While Jackson excelled as a leader, he was not interested in the minutiae of coaching, according to sources familiar with the situation. He so rarely watched film that the video team eventually stopped loading clips onto his laptop. Meanwhile, his relationship with the front office grew more strained. After Jackson’s departure, Lacob would tell a group of venture capitalists, “You can’t have 200 people in the organization not like you.”

There were other concerns. For one, Jackson emphasized his faith. “It’s fine to be religious,” says one Warriors insider, “but it’s a different thing to



bring it to your work.” When Jason Collins announced his homosexuality in April 2013, Jackson told reporters, “I know Jason Collins; I know his family and am certainly praying for them.” This seemed particularly tone-deaf considering that COO Rick Welts, the first high-ranking sports executive to come out, worked in the same building. Welts says he and Jackson had “a nice conversation, like grown-ups,” adding, “He knew how I felt, I knew how he felt. I’m sure he thought it was an opportunity to educate me, and I thought it was an opportunity to educate him.”

When the Warriors hired Kerr, they hoped he would bring stability.

HARRISON BARNES was shocked when Kerr called him last May and said he wanted to meet him wherever he was. (He happened to be in Miami.) Says Barnes, “It would’ve been easy for him to fly and meet Steph and just call everybody else.”

A talented 22-year-old forward, Barnes was coming off a miserable season. As the leader of the second unit, he was expected to score, often out of isolation sets. It hadn’t worked. Kerr showed Barnes his iso stats and said, “I don’t think you were used last year in a way that was best for you. But if you buy into what we’re saying, you have a chance to be successful.”

Over the weeks that followed, Kerr met with a number of other players, even flying to Australia to see Bogut. He gave them all the same message: *Here is what I’m hoping to do, here’s why, and here’s how.* The players, some of whom had been conspicuously silent when Kerr got hired, appreciated the no-b.s. approach. “I think he was destined to be a coach,” says Thompson. “He’s got a real good way of dealing with people.”

This may have something to do with Kerr’s upbringing, which is well chronicled. When Kerr was 18 and a freshman at Arizona, his father, Malcolm, was the president at American University of Beirut. On Jan. 18, 1984, as the elder Kerr headed to work, he was shot twice in the head and killed. Three years later, as a Wildcats senior, Kerr became a central character in John Feinstein’s *A Season Inside*, which paints a portrait of a scarred yet uncommonly mature young man. At an age when most people were still forming an identity, Kerr already knew exactly who he was.

Now, as a coach, he wanted to be both firm and fair. And that meant making tough decisions. After two weeks of his first training camp, Kerr knew that for Barnes to fulfill his potential, he needed to start, so he could play off Curry and Thompson. And that meant telling Andre Iguodala, a former All-Star, that he was going to the bench.

Iguodala was skeptical at first. “But it’s important not to dismiss things immediately,” he says. Kerr had made some valid points. The second unit, so ineffective in 2013–14, needed Iguodala’s leadership and playmaking. And Iguodala appreciated Kerr’s directness. “I agreed with his larger vision,” he says. Plus, he adds, “I’ve been in this league 11 years, and I want my professionalism to stand out.” He accepted the demotion gracefully.

“Who is going to complain now?” Kerr asks.

Then, in late October, Kerr got lucky: 6’ 9” David Lee strained his left hamstring. A two-time All-Star, Lee is a gifted playmaker and finisher.

He’s also a subpar defender who lacks the range to be a stretch four. Even so, Kerr claims he had no plans to bench the veteran before the injury. “If David Lee doesn’t get hurt, he’s still starting, for sure,” says Kerr.

But Lee *did* get hurt, allowing Kerr to start Green—a move that assistants had pleaded with Jackson to make a year earlier. A 6’ 6” forward-slash-maniac, Green is one of the few humans who can guard both Dwight Howard and Chris Paul. “Each possession is a battle, and you never want to lose a battle,” says Green, who leads the league in defensive rating (96.3) and defensive win shares (3.6). “If somebody scores on me, it really bothers me.”

This delights Adams, Kerr’s defensive coordinator, who runs a “shell” protection scheme predicated on length, anticipation, and the ability to think and act decisively. Players switch almost every pick-and-roll, taking advantage of all their interchangeable parts, and everyone is accountable. In particular, Adams pushed Curry to play hard on every possession. Steph embraced the challenge. He has improved from an average to above-average defender, leading the league in steals (110) while ranking eighth (tied, at 99.7) in defensive rating.

But then the Warriors’ defense was already potent when Kerr arrived. It’s on the other side of the ball that he has had the largest impact.

Iguodala, the 11th-year veteran, accepted his demotion gracefully and the second unit benefited. “Who is going to complain now?” Kerr asks.



MANY FIRST-TIME coaches begin their careers by mimicking a mentor—think Erik Spoelstra in Miami or Mike Budenholzer in Atlanta. Kerr has the advantage not only of multiple Hall of Fame mentors but also a respected offensive sidekick in Gentry, whom he hired last June. Together they created what Gentry calls a “melting pot” offense. Watch the Warriors and you’ll see the high-post feeds of Phil Jackson’s triangle offense, the drag screens and sideline tilts favored by Mike D’Antoni’s Suns (where Kerr served as GM from 2007–08 to ’09–10), the low-post splits from Jerry



the hero and reinvent the wheel,” adding, “He’s very mature for a first-time coach, to be able to have an awareness of the bigger goals, not just having the best record.”

Green agrees. “He doesn’t let us settle for mediocrity in anything.”

ONE PLACE that Kerr certainly does not abide mediocrity: on the stair-climber. After almost every practice, he engages in a one-man assault upon the hulking black machine in the corner of the Warriors’ practice facility, after which he does pushups and planks. Unless, as on one recent afternoon, he is challenged. “Coach Kerr,” beckons Curry, “you want some today?”

Kerr dismounts and prepares for battle. Though he was an 86.4% free throw shooter, he knows the odds are against him. He and Curry play a game to 10, shooting two free throws at a time, where each make is worth one point but a swish is worth two. And, as you might imagine, Steph does a lot of swishing. Kerr says that the two have battled

11 times, during which he has made roughly 84 out of 85 free throws—and won only once. “Steph swishes them all.”

GOLDEN AGE

It took Iguodala’s demotion (far left) and Green’s (near left) promotion-through-injury, but the Warriors have their best All-Star-break record ever.

What is coaching if not a power-balancing act? Here is Kerr, one of the best shooters in NBA history—and a famously competitive man—willing to lose repeatedly to his star. That takes

a certain innate confidence that carries over to other areas. At the end of timeouts he often asks his players if they’re seeing anything he isn’t. Earlier this year, guard Leandro Barbosa suggested a late-game play. Kerr used it.

Kerr is a believer in process and preparation. He asks his video staff to load the previous five games of every opponent onto his laptop. Last July he visited Seahawks coach Pete Carroll and was impressed with how Carroll used music to energize practices. Now the Warriors do the same thing.

Other times, Kerr’s moves are diplomatic. From Day One, he has made a point of consistently praising Mark Jackson, which built good will with his players. Similarly, he downplays his impact on the team at every turn. “Usually winning breeds arrogance, but he’s a rare guy,” says Van Gundy, who also applauds the work Jackson did for Golden State. “Very few people I’ve known in coaching would have this humility with this success.”

That Kerr is also comfortable with the media doesn’t come as a surprise. As a former broadcaster (and sports columnist for his high school paper), he understands the power of narrative. Take the famous story of how he and Jordan got into a fistfight after practice, oft-cited as proof of Kerr’s fire and toughness. “Let’s be honest,” he says. “If we were losing right now, the narrative would be, This is a guy that got beat up by Michael Jordan. We just tailor the facts to however the story is going.”

After a few warmups, Kerr bricks his first two free throws. Curry bricks one of his first set. Eventually both men begin making their shots and, as usual, Curry wins on yet another moonball swish, after which he runs off in celebration, returning only to pantomime a golfer’s handshake. For a moment, though, it was interesting to see the two of them, disgusted with themselves and trying not to show it.

Two men bent on winning, united by a momentary failure. □

Sloan’s old Jazz handbook and, most prominently, the motion offense and loop series of Popovich’s Spurs. The result: a system in which the only sin is standing still.

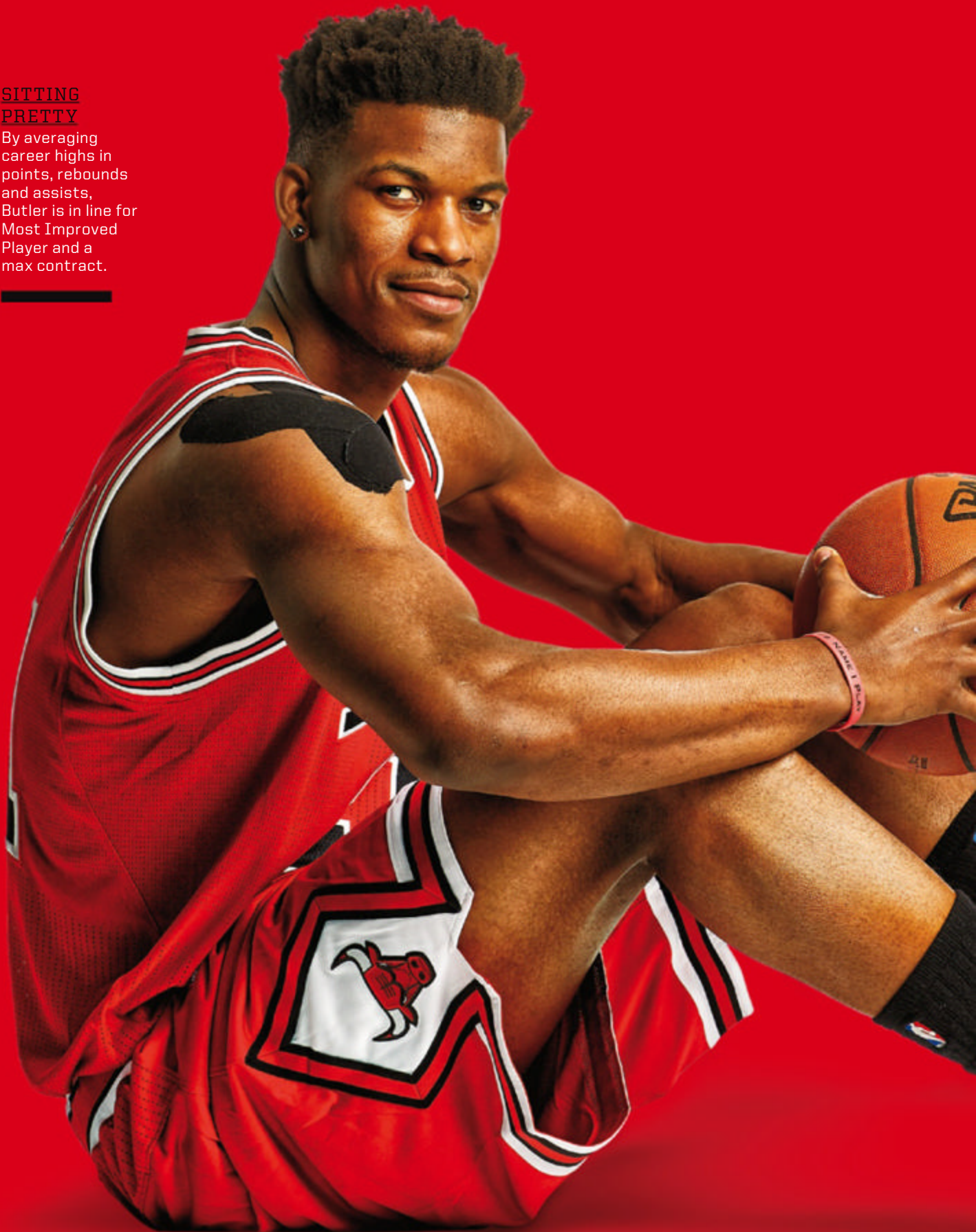
Initial results were mixed. There were moments of gorgeous passing and cutting, but also turnovers. Lots of turnovers. For a coach like Kerr, who believes that moving the ball, limiting mistakes and defending are the keys to basketball, it was painful to watch. “I had so many ideas in my head,” Kerr admits. “I put in too much.”

So he simplified the offense, from more than 20 plays to a core of four or five sequences, enforcing key concepts. And it worked. The Warriors, one year after finishing last in the league in passes per game (245.8), are now 11th (313.6). They lead the NBA in both assists (1,389, tied with the Hawks) and hockey assists (8.1 per game), and they’ve cut their early-season turnover rate by a third (from 22.1 to 14.6). In previous years, Curry and Thompson often launched difficult jumpers, and Thompson rarely ran off screens. This year Thompson’s improvement is due in large part to the evolution of his game, but he and Curry are also getting easier shots. “No one knew how good Klay really was last year,” says one opposing coach, “because Mark never ran any plays for him.” Which, in retrospect, may help explain why Golden State chose not to trade Thompson for Kevin Love.

So far Kerr’s players welcome his approach. Curry appreciates that Kerr didn’t “try to come in and be

**SITTING
PRETTY**

By averaging career highs in points, rebounds and assists, Butler is in line for Most Improved Player and a max contract.





NBA MIDSEASON REPORT

RUNNING THE GAUNTLET

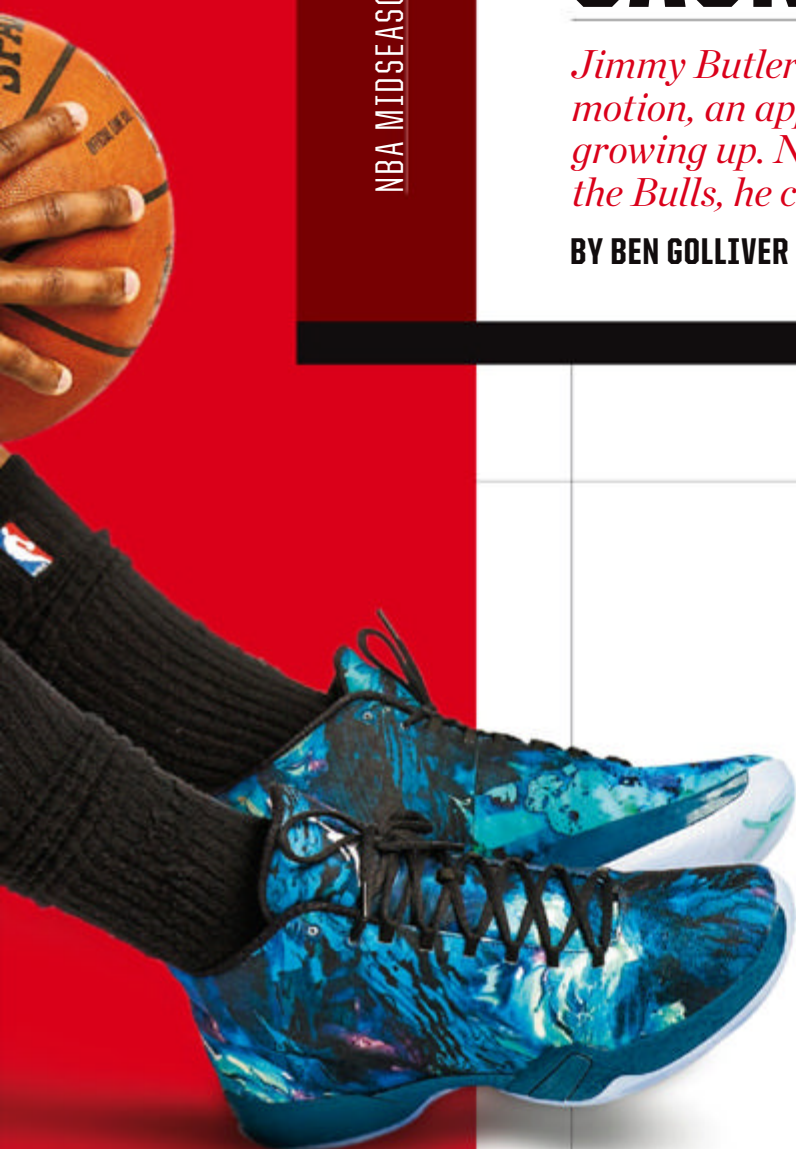
Jimmy Butler's game is defined by constant motion, an approach he learned the hard way growing up. Now, in his breakout season for the Bulls, he can see just how far he's come

BY BEN GOLLIVER

Photograph by
Todd Rosenberg
For Sports Illustrated

JIMMY BUTLER'S signature move isn't a single action at all, but a flurry. His constant movement is at once exhilarating and exhausting—poaching in passing lanes, bulldozing through screens, blazing on the break, storming the paint, pounding in the post. The numbers confirm the impression that the Bulls' lithe, 6' 7" swingman is everywhere at once: Butler leads the NBA in minutes played and, according to motion tracking cameras, distance covered on the court. During a December win over the Knicks he had an offensive rebound, a steal and two assists in 44 seconds. In January he scored nine straight fourth-quarter points in 67 seconds to help force overtime against the Lakers.

Butler, 25, first arrived on the NBA scene as a designated shadow, following the opposition's star wings wherever they went. But this year he has taken over the spotlight, averaging 20.4 points, 5.8 rebounds and 3.2 assists, all career highs, to become the favorite for Most Improved Player. NBA fans recognized Butler's progress on nearly a half-million





All-Star ballots—votes of confidence, so to speak—ranking the former defensive specialist among the 25 most popular players in the league.

He has risen from a homeless, withdrawn teenager in Tomball, Texas, to a confident Eastern Conference All-Star, and another chapter of his remarkable story is coming in July, when he is likely to sign a max contract.

Michelle Lambert, the mother of four biological children who welcomed a 16-year-old Butler into her home, watches every Chicago game. “Mommy,” as Butler calls her, sees the lessons that he absorbed as a teen play out in his full-bore charges from baseline to baseline. “Going fast is instilled in Jimmy,” Lambert says. “If you’re moving and producing, you stay in the plans. If you stop or slow down for a second, it all might disappear.”

ABOUT 40 MILES northwest of Houston, Tomball is a suburban town of 11,124, or just more than half of the United Center’s capacity. Butler is Texas proud. He prefers cowboy boots to dress shoes, and his agent, Happy Walters, says Butler would “much rather hang out with Garth Brooks than Lil Wayne.” Butler can be seen on Instagram, a red bandana around his neck, riding a horse. He name-checks his hometown in interviews and more than once has challenged reporters to find it on a map. “Tomball isn’t as country as people make you think,” Butler says. “We have like three Walmarts. We have a lot of stoplights. It’s cool.”

Caucasians outnumber African-Americans by more than 15 to 1 in Tomball, and the town has had episodes of racial tension. In 2005, while Butler was a sophomore at Tomball High, the White Camelia Knights of the Ku Klux Klan held an event at the town’s community center. In ’13 an African-American student at Tomball Junior High received a KKK-themed birthday party invitation from two classmates. Butler happily recalls a childhood spent trying to be the fastest—outracing kids on the football field, rushing to turn in his multiplication

tests first, scarfing down dinner before everyone else at the table—and describes Tomball as “mellow” and “family-oriented.” Yet those words could hardly be less applicable to his own upbringing.

By age 13, Butler found himself without a permanent residence. His mother, Londa, kicked him out of her home, saying, as Butler told ESPN.com, that she “didn’t like the look of him.” Jordan Leslie, Michelle Lambert’s son and Butler’s close friend, refers to a precipitating “incident” between mother and son but refuses to go further, calling it “Jimmy’s business.” Londa declines to comment on the subject, and Butler tenses up when it is broached. He again puts up a wall when asked about his early relationship with his father, a truck driver also named Jimmy.

When none of his extended family stepped in, Butler moved in with his friend Jermaine Thomas. “We were always together as kids,” Butler says. “I consider him to be my brother.” The pair first lived without much direct parental supervision in a two-bedroom house rented by Thomas’s father, also a truck driver and often on the road, and then took to sleeping



*“Going fast is instilled in Jimmy,” Lambert says. “If you’re moving and producing, you stay in the plans. **If you stop or slow down, it all might disappear.**”*



over at friends’ houses for days at a time. “There were times we needed to make 10 bucks last all week for lunch money for both of us,” Thomas says. “We would eat a bag of chips and Gatorade every day.”

It would take two years of hand-to-mouth living before Butler received his first vote of confidence. Before his senior year Butler crossed paths with Leslie, a freshman, at a summer basketball tournament. The two teens quickly discovered a shared love of sports, and Leslie’s own childhood struggles helped him connect to Butler. Leslie’s father, who was African-American, had been struck and killed by a car.

The summer before Butler’s senior year Lambert welcomed him and Thomas into her four-bedroom home. An engineer tech at Hilcorp Energy, she remembers Butler as “deathly shy” and “very quiet,” conditioned



BUILDING BLOCK

Butler, who this year is making plays as well as shining on defense, found a measure of stability after he moved in with Lambert (below).



SEEING NO better option, Butler enrolled at nearby Tyler Junior College, hoping it would serve as a springboard to D-I. He was spotted by Marquette assistant Buzz Williams, on assignment to scout another Tyler player. Williams took the liberty of approaching Butler after the game in a meeting that called to mind an Old West stare-down between a couple of hard-chargers from small-town Texas. “He told me that I f----- sucked,” Butler recalls, laughing. “That I was just flashy. That all I do is worry about myself and that he would show my ass if I was playing for him.”

Though Butler was initially put off, his delicate ego wounded, the pitch worked. When Williams became the Marquette coach in April 2008, Butler was his first recruit, committing to move 1,100 miles to Milwaukee despite having previously left Texas on only two brief occasions. The scholarship offer was Butler’s second vote of confidence, but Lambert believes it was Williams’s candor that ultimately made him the first real male authority figure in Butler’s

life. “I was just telling him the truth,” says Williams, now the coach at Virginia Tech. “He knew he had a lot of work to do.”

The fall semester had barely started before Lambert was flooded with phone calls. “Mommy, I want to come home; I made a mistake,” Butler would plead, only to hear Lambert tell him to “suck it up.” Having left his small pond behind, Butler was now simply a big fish out of water. He arrived shortly before classes started, bringing only his familiar T-shirts and shorts. Soon he would have to raid his teammates’ closets for clothes: He remembers being so naive that he hadn’t considered the weather in Wisconsin might differ from what he was used to in Texas.

The basketball transition was just as hard: The Golden Eagles’ roster included future pros Wesley Matthews, Lazar Hayward and Jerel McNeal. “I got humbled really quick,” Butler says. Looming over everything was Williams, who was trying to make a name for himself and was more than able, Butler says, “to rip your heart out in a heartbeat.” He laughs now about all the times he got chewed out. “*Chewing* is the right word,” Butler says. “[Williams] dips, he chews tobacco. He’s spitting in your face, he’s yelling, it’s brown, it’s really bad. But he doesn’t care.”

Butler responded by adopting an entrepreneurial approach. He put his T-Mac dreams on hold and committed all out to offensive rebounding and passing, creating extra scoring chances for his more experienced teammates. “I had to figure out my way to play,” he says. “I could do no wrong if I gave up the ball to them. And then I would get playing time.”

By his junior year Butler had persuaded Williams to give him 34 minutes a night. Marquette’s roster was undersized, and Butler’s length, motor and ability to play multiple positions were all pluses. “It was incredibly hard to take him off the floor,” Williams says. “He wasn’t great at anything, he just wasn’t bad at anything.” Butler’s dedication and intelligence set him apart. “Jimmy never dropped a class, he never missed a weight session, he was never late to anything,” Williams says. “He was doing exactly what was asked of him. Jimmy is very smart academically, and he’s very smart off the floor because of all the things

to keep a low profile so that he wouldn’t be kicked out of wherever he crashed. She harbored no hoop dreams for Butler’s future; the blonde “Mama Bear” simply couldn’t turn him away once Leslie told her that Butler and Thomas had nowhere else to go, even if that meant cramped quarters and a strained pocketbook.

When Butler moved in, his only possessions were a collection of well-worn T-shirts and basketball shorts. He slept on the couch or on the floor out of habit and convenience to the family. He would race from Leslie’s bedroom down the stairs and out the front door to avoid any possibility of conflict, and he completed his chores without complaint. In Lambert’s eyes Butler was a “damaged little bird” who struggled with trust issues, who recoiled from something as simple as a hug. His pain was so evident that Lambert made it a point never to pry into his past.

On the court, Butler admits, he compensated for feelings of inadequacy with an “ego problem.” Envisioning himself as the next Tracy McGrady, the Rockets’ star he idolized, Butler would brag to teammates that he could score 40 points on Derrick Rose, if the top player in the 2007 high school class would only dare come to Texas. But despite earning All-District honors as a senior, Butler failed to make real noise in Houston’s AAU scene and received no Division I offers. “I was never good enough,” he says, shaking his head. “It was always me against the world. I thought like that for so long.”

Butler was no longer consumed by the horrifying question, Will the lunch money last? But he still faced a daunting predicament familiar to high school graduates: Now what?



he's been through. He has an uncanny ability to connect the dots."

The next round of motivation would come from bitter disappointment. Marquette entered the first round of the 2010 NCAA tournament as the favorite against Washington, but Quincy Pondexter drove past Butler for a game-winning runner in the closing seconds. Butler says that was the turning point of his college career. "I taped the picture of that play to my door so that every day when I woke up, I could see Pondexter sending my ass home, scoring on my ass like I was nothing," he says, still disgusted five years later. "I told [Williams] from that day forward, I was going to be a great defender."

"He realized that lives change on a single possession," Williams says. "He has an insatiable desire to get better. His drive is pure. He's willing to sacrifice."

As a senior Butler wasn't named to any of the All-Big East teams, but he led Marquette to the Sweet 16 and graduated with a communications degree. Recently Butler surprised Williams by showing up at his home unannounced on the coach's birthday. He spent the entire day with Williams's family, going to a pizza parlor for dinner and tucking Williams's kids into bed. "Our relationship was never built on basketball," Williams says. "That's not what his heart needed."

BUTLER NEXT applied his relentless approach to the 2011 predraft process. He took home MVP honors at the Portsmouth Invitational Tournament, and his energy caught the eye of Walters, whose Relativity Sports firm was just getting serious about basketball. Walters hounded NBA executives to invite his new client in for workouts and made sure Butler had a spot at the league's official combine. After years of scrounging for respect, Butler began to feel validated. Doc Rivers, a Marquette star in the early 1980s who was then the Celtics' coach, couldn't stop praising Butler to his former assistant, Bulls coach Tom Thibodeau. Chicago delivered Butler's third vote of confidence, selecting him with the final pick in the first round.

Thibodeau quickly concluded that the Bulls had landed a gem. Butler was a tireless, physical, selfless, defensive-minded wing, a strong fit for Thibodeau's suffocating style and a perfect understudy for All-Star forward Luol Deng. "If they don't bite as puppies, they usually don't bite," Thibodeau says. "Jimmy was biting right from the start."

The national NBA audience got its first real introduction to Butler during the 2013 playoffs. Butler played all 48 minutes in five of Chicago's 12 postseason games, and his pesky defense on LeBron James in the second round won him many admirers, even as Miami took the next four games. "Some guys say all the right things and do none of them," says Thibodeau. "Jimmy is just the opposite. He doesn't say a lot, but he's always doing the right things."



HARD DRIVE

No one in the NBA plays more minutes or covers more ground than Butler, who has become a Bulls linchpin in just his fourth season.

The Bulls traded Deng in January 2014, creating an opening for Butler, but he was hampered by a right-foot injury. He entered last summer with an eye toward rediscovering the Tomball High scoring game he had abandoned at Marquette. Moving to Houston for the summer, Butler settled in with close friends, canceled his cable and Internet service, and worked out three times a day, slimming down from 245 pounds to 232

so that he could move more freely. He sharpened his perimeter shooting and his mid-post game, studied tape of Michael Jordan and Kobe Bryant, and put himself through endless ballhandling drills.

The results have been superb: Butler is leading Chicago in scoring, his playmaking draws rave reviews from the coaching staff, and he remains a strong contender for the All-Defensive team. "He's always had the heart, and he's always had the toughness," says Miami Heat guard and fellow Marquette alum Dwyane Wade, "and now he's put it all together with his game."

There's evidence of his newfound confidence everywhere. Butler has attempted a career-high 14.3 shots per game, delivered in late-game situations and called himself Baby Mike—as in Jordan—during practice trash-talking sessions. He has also cultivated a distinctive hairstyle: shaved tight on the sides and long on top. "My hair is nappy, but that's my brand," he winks. "When I was in high school, people would make fun of you for that, and you would have to shave. Now I have a brand."

Butler's offensive emergence and defensive consistency

have helped Chicago reach the top of the Central Division standings, despite injuries to Rose and Joakim Noah. But Butler's progress will almost certainly cost the Bulls a small fortune. Last fall they offered a contract worth more than \$40 million over four years. Butler says a deal was "really close," but he chose to bet on himself instead. Next summer he's likely to weigh offers of \$70 million over four years as a restricted free agent, though executive VP of basketball operations John Paxson has vowed to match them. "In terms of being a two-way player," says Thibodeau, "he's as good as it gets."

WHEN LAMBERT talks to Butler now, she sees how wins and losses can still produce mood swings, how he remains reticent to open up about his experiences, how he uses laughter to mask his emotions and how he tries to find positive ways to channel his pain.

Lambert has done everything in her power to convey to Butler that her love for him is unconditional. She forbids her younger children from wearing other players' signature clothing and shoes because it would be "disrespectful." She flew her family to visit Butler and Thomas for Christmas in Chicago, and she takes joy in hearing them hoot and holler during late-night games of Spades and Bourré. She marvels at Butler's emergence, calling it "a living dream," and sends him the same text message before every game: "Good luck, Lovebug. I love you so much." Yet Lambert understands that Butler can't help but seek two more votes: those of his biological parents.

Butler's voice catches as he explains that his father has followed his basketball career over the years, and that the two men continue to work on their relationship. "I love my dad to death," he says, preferring to leave it at that.

Shortly after he was drafted, Butler reached out to Londa, and they coordinated their first sitdown in years. He says his mother is proud of his accomplishments, and he has spent time with her two other children during the off-season. "She's still my mom," Butler says. "I have a lot of love for her. There's no bad blood. We're family."

There's a photo, taken last August, of Butler with his long, left arm wrapped around Londa's shoulder. Both wear smiles and glasses, with Tomball concrete under their feet and fluffy clouds dotting the blue sky above. The town's forgotten son has become its favorite son, and he is solely focused on moving forward.

"Nobody is perfect, so no one should be condemned," Butler says. "How do I forgive? There's no reason to hate or dislike. I don't believe in that. Obviously, it took a while to get to that point. All of that history is a part of me being here, but the past is the past. I forgive everybody. I love everybody. That's that." □

NBA MIDSEASON REPORT

EYE OPENERS

Three noteworthy stats illuminate some of the season's most interesting trends, from the best of the best . . . to the worst of the best

BY ROB MAHONEY



+12.3: THE WARRIORS' NET RATING

The mettle of a championship contender is typically measured by net rating, which is margin of victory adjusted for pace. Golden State is outscoring opponents by 12.3 points per 100 possessions, according to NBA.com; the difference between that mark and the second-place Hawks' +7.1 is roughly equivalent to that between Atlanta's and the 14th-place Suns'. In fact, the Warriors have the highest net rating since 1995-96, when the 72-win Bulls ran wild. It appears we have our championship favorite.

51.2%-52.3%-91.1%:

KYLE KORVER'S SHOOTING PERCENTAGES

The 50-40-90 club (50% shooting from the field, 40% from three and 90% from the line) is a crowning achievement for an NBA shooter. Among qualified statistical leaders, only six players have gained membership. Korver is on pace to be the seventh, while establishing a new club: the 50-50-90. This is why Korver, long regarded as a role player, is an All-Star: His accuracy is unprecedented, and its effect on opposing defenses profound.



35-47: PROJECTED RECORDS OF THE HORNETS AND THE HEAT

While the cold reality of the West's playoff picture means at least two worthy entrants will be left out, the East features Charlotte and Miami in its seventh and eighth seeds with identical 22-30 records. *Pitiful* doesn't quite cover it. Not since the 1994-95 Celtics has a team made the postseason with a win percentage as dreadful as .427; this year the East could have two. On a surely unrelated note, commissioner Adam Silver recently noted that the NBA will look into changing the playoff structure.





T

HE RECORD will reflect that former North Carolina basketball coach Dean Smith died on Feb. 7, at age 83. But to the players and assistants he worked with most closely over 36 seasons, it felt as if he had left them years ago, when his most characteristic feature—a dauntingly sharp memory—began to slip away.

In December 2007, a decade after leaving the bench, Smith suffered neurological complications following knee replacement surgery. His already low public profile in retirement receded further, and he didn't travel to the 2009 Final Four in Detroit, where his

former assistant Roy Williams led the Tar Heels to the NCAA title. Over the summer of 2010 news of his decline went public, first in a column in the *Fayetteville Observer*, which said Smith had “good days and bad days”; then in blogged confessions by longtime ACC chronicler John Feinstein; and finally in a statement from Smith's family, which described his “progressive neurocognitive disorder.”

In fact, Smith hadn't been the same for a number of years. He had run stop signs and fumbled phone numbers. When playing golf he could no longer keep his own score, much less everyone else's, in his head. Former Tar Heels stopped receiving Smith's usual notes of good wishes on the eve of each NBA season, which had reminded them that he'd be watching when they took the floor. Linda Woods, Smith's longtime executive assistant, and Bill Guthridge, his aide for all but six of his seasons in Chapel Hill, became increasingly alarmed as they shared accounts of his forgetfulness and erratic

behavior. Smith was caught in a limbo that so many families know, in which a loved one can't bear to forgo his customary independence yet can no longer be trusted to safely carry out old routines.

But several generations of Smith's basketball collaborators did have a chance to say goodbye, and thanks, on a Friday night in February 2010, in the midst of a 100th-anniversary season that was otherwise giving North Carolina fans little to celebrate. Some 70 players, ranging in age from their 20s to their 80s, gathered in the Dean Smith Center for an old-timers' game. Everyone knew that the building's namesake wasn't what he used to be. The organizers' challenge was to fold into the festivities a man who abhorred the spotlight and wouldn't consent to anything that placed him at its center. Smith's confused state could be an asset. Or it could be a curse.

As it turned out, this installment of Carolina basketball's Celebration of a Century fell on one of Smith's relatively good days. At halftime of the old-timers' game, the players girdled the court as lights dimmed for a five-minute video tribute to the former coach. Smith had drummed into his players that, after scoring, each should point at the teammate who made the basket possible. “We hope you'll forgive as we employ one of your many innovations” went the narration by Fred Kiger, a Chapel Hill alumnus and historian. “In this place that bears your name . . . we'll pause and point to you, for a lifelong assist.”



DEAN SMITH / 1931-2015

Hail and Farewell

Five years ago, amid his sad decline, the coach's former players and assistants found a way to say to him what he had always told them: Thank you

By ALEXANDER WOLFF

Before the video played, Smith's son, Scott, found a pretext—"We've got to meet Coach Williams"—to escort his father from their private box down to the tunnel leading to the court. Williams, who had been an assistant during Smith's first championship season, in 1982, had a challenge of his own: to get Smith to agree to walk from there out to center court. Williams settled on a strategy: He would collect the other assistants from '82, Guthridge and Eddie Fogler, and he would let Smith see a bit of the video—"but not so much," he'd later say, "that he realizes it's all about him." In the tunnel Williams went into a kind of Four Corners to keep Smith distracted.

"What are we going to do?" Smith asked him.

"Walk out and wave to the crowd."

"Why are we going to do that?"

"It's part of this weekend."

As Smith cycled through his questions again, Williams ran more clock. "I think he was a little confused," Williams would recall. "He sensed it was some recognition of him, but the only way I could sell it was, 'You join Coach Guthridge and Coach Fogler and me.'"

The video ended. A spotlight swung to the mouth of the tunnel. As the four men walked to center court, applause began to swell, and Smith did what he'd done, reflexively, his entire career. He pointed to others. First he pointed to Williams, Guthridge and Fogler. Then he pointed at the crowd, mouthing "Thank you" through the din. When they reached center court and the lights came up, Smith fixed Williams with a hug. The players advanced toward the center circle in their Blue Team and White Team singlets. Each stepped forward to hug and thank the coach.

Some players Smith would hug and release, only to pull them back for another hug once, it seemed, he had made a positive I.D. Then he left, still pointing, to a spray of flashing camera phones. The sellout crowd remained on its feet, applauding and chanting, "Thank you, thank you!"

"Dean got a little emotional that night," Guthridge would say. "It's the first time I'd ever seen that. He was in a state of mind that he was going to do what he was told to do. And that wasn't his usual state."

MID-OCTOBER IS what any follower of college basketball recognizes as a time of transition. It was then, in 2010, that I passed through Chapel Hill to check in on several of the people most affected by the old coach's decline. The campus was swaddled in warm weather that seemed determined to hold back the turn of the season. But as I stood outside the Smith Center, watching men in cherry pickers swap out Tar Heels basketball centennial banners for generic ones, I felt as if I'd stumbled onto the set of a powder-blue pageant based on Ecclesiastes.

I sought out Eric Montross, old double zero, the Hoosier who had emigrated to North Carolina as a college freshman and never looked back. "As a teenager and player in school, you live in the present," he told me. "You don't think about how what you're being taught fits into the scope of life. Now that I'm a dad with a 10- and a 12-year-old, I get what Coach Smith was all about. He taught us not for the next day or the next game, but for the rest of our lives. Something he taught us each day was meant to be remembered."

At every Tar Heels practice each player was expected to know, and spit back on demand, that day's point of emphasis on offense, the point of emphasis on defense and the thought for the day—an aphorism such as *Do not judge another man until you've walked a full moon in his moccasins*, or, *When moving a mountain, begin by removing the smallest stone*. "You'd repeat it verbatim," Montross said, "or the whole team would run."

Montross had worked as both a Tar Heels radio commentator and an athletics fund-raiser after his NBA career wound down, and he regarded being back on campus as a great privilege, for it had allowed for unscheduled encounters with Smith even as the coach's faculties began to fade. "I really treasured the casual meetings, because there's nothing casual in the relationship between player and coach," he said. "You'd been ushered into real life, and it could now be man-to-man."

"There wasn't a team I played for in the NBA where someone didn't ask me, 'What is it about Carolina? Why do you guys all go back there in the summertime?' Even as a player, I didn't get it. It's a cliché to say that looking back, everything is crystal clear,

"Now I get what Coach Smith was all about," Montross said. "He taught us not for the next day, but for the rest of our lives."





THE LONG GAME

Smith (opposite, right) played on KU's '52 NCAA champs and coached Perkins (above, left) and Jordan to the '82 title.

Coach Smith had a hand in creating that.

"We kind of duped him into going out there in February. He could spin things to stay out of the limelight, but that night he couldn't spin it. And there wasn't one of us who wasn't thrilled that he was in complete discomfort.

"It's hard for us to display our affection for him. It's not that he's untouchable or inaccessible. It's that he's Coach. That night in February gave a lot of guys the chance to come back and pay tribute. And for guys to get to hug him? Even after a big win, how many times did we think of hugging Coach Smith?"

"It was important for him to get a sense of our appreciation," Montross said, "but it was probably more important for us to do that than for him to get it. When you'd say, 'Thank you,' he'd always say, 'No, thank you.' Well, we got in the last 'Thank you.'"

Steps away from Montross's office I found Bill Guthridge, the fellow Kansan and math major Smith had gotten to know through Guthridge's sister, Joan, whom he had once dated. The most loyal of assistants, Guthridge had taken over for the first three seasons following Smith's retirement, in 1997. He told me that Smith had faded substantially during the eight months since that February celebration. Smith's family had originally wanted to control information about his health, because they feared he would see or hear a news report that might contain details that would alarm him. Now, Guthridge

but that's the overwhelming theme from the players—a pride and respect and sense of belonging to this place. There's just nobody who says, 'Now, why would I want to go back to Chapel Hill?'

made clear, Smith was no longer really following the news.

Former players would call Guthridge, wondering if he could arrange and chaperone what might be a last lunch with their old coach. So Guthridge played the role of facilitator, buffer, softener of the blow. The guys tended to come through two-by-two: Jimmy Black and Donald Williams had just done so; Billy Cunningham and Doug Moe had made the pilgrimage over the summer. A recent lunch with Smith had been particularly hard for Phil Ford, the former Tar Heels great who was then a Charlotte Bobcats assistant coach. "Dean must have repeated 10 times, 'If you need anything, let me know,'" Guthridge told me. "He couldn't really carry on a conversation. Phil's will probably be one of the last names to go, because he meant so much to Dean. The guys from the late '60s—Rusty Clark, Dick Grubar, Bobby Lewis, Larry Miller—those guys were really special to him too. Today he'd still remember them, I'm guessing.

"We realize he's not the Dean Smith we knew. Nobody wants to live the way he's living."

Williams felt for Guthridge in his new role. "He has to cover up," Williams told me, "and that's something Coach Guthridge has never had to do before." Williams too had had to reconfigure the formative relationship of his professional life. When he first joined Smith's staff, Smith tasked him with the most demanding grunt work. But Smith also noticed and admired in Williams a memory to rival his own. Within 24 hours of the start of Smith's basketball camp, Williams knew every kid's name.

At the time we spoke, Williams had won for North Carolina as many national titles as Smith did, in less than one fifth the tenure, yet he had never called Smith anything but Coach or Coach Smith. "He was my coach even though I never played a second for him," Williams said. "I have him on a pedestal as a

person, as a coach and, needless to say, as my mentor.” For Williams’s first five seasons as North Carolina’s head coach, there’d be a message light on his phone within 15 minutes of a game’s end, with Smith’s congratulations after a win and encouragement after a loss. Then, during the season the Tar Heels won the 2009 NCAA title, the messages came less often. And the following year Smith attended only two practices all season.

For a while, when outsiders would ask after Smith, Williams was instinctively protective. “What’s happening to him is what happens to the rest of us when we turn 50,” he told one sportswriter. “But,” Williams told me, “I was covering it up.”

Williams has his own intimate history with memory loss. Like Smith he had a lone sibling—an older sister, Frances—and she was diagnosed with dementia in her early 50s. “She was dead at 60,” Williams said. The chance to visit Frances regularly in an assisted-living facility helped lure Williams back to North Carolina from Kansas. She recognized him, until one day she didn’t. Before that day came, she’d told him, “Don’t come see me. It won’t help me. It’ll just make you sad.” The day Frances failed to recognize him, Williams made sure to tell Dean Smith. “I can understand,” Smith said. Williams knew he could. Smith’s mother, Vesta, had died at 94 with advanced dementia.

On that February night in 2010, after he had led his old boss back into the tunnel, Williams turned to Smith and, through his emotion, said, “Coach, thank you.”

Williams knew what was coming: “No, thank you.” Then, puddling up, Smith gave his old assistant one more embrace.

In a season with little to show for itself—a 20–17 record after a championship run, which left Williams feeling, he said, “like I’d let Coach Smith down”—this was the highlight. “The best choreographer in the world couldn’t have done better,” Williams said. “[Smith] didn’t understand it when we started out from the tunnel. But all of a sudden he knew he had a chance to be with his former players.

TRY, TRY AGAIN

During a string of Final Four losses (here to Dayton in ’67), Smith never lost faith that the Tar Heels could hoist the trophy.

“He always understood what he meant to everybody, but never wanted that to be the last thought. He wanted you to be the last thought. Ninety-nine percent of the time he’s deflecting attention, but at that moment he realized that this was a moment meant for him. He really meant ‘Thank you.’”

From that night, Williams said, Smith took away only one regret: “He said to me, ‘I couldn’t remember everyone’s name.’

“It killed him. It’s a cruel world we live in, that he no longer had that one thing that he had had so powerfully for so long.”

ONE NIGHT IN 1965, when Dean Smith was still a thirtysomething basketball technocrat trying to justify his post as successor to the magisterial Frank McGuire, his Tar Heels returned to campus after a 22-point thumping at Wake Forest. There, over the front door of old Woollen Gym, the players found their coach hung in effigy. Billy Cunningham sprang from the team bus to make short work of the scene. Two years later Smith would reach his first of 11 Final Fours. In another nine years he’d lead the U.S. to an Olympic gold medal, and by 1983 he’d be elected to the Bas-

ketball Hall of Fame. But in the aftermath of that moment outside the gym, somewhere in the bottom he had just hit, Smith found an unlikely strength. His sister, Joan, gave him a book by the theologian Catherine Marshall called *Beyond Ourselves*. From reading one chapter, “The Power of Helplessness,” Smith gradually accepted the futility of pretending that we can control the forces that act upon us. That realization proved to be both liberating and empowering, a glorious paradox alien to his chosen profession: Surrender, and you shall be free.

In that, Williams and Guthridge and Montross and the extended Tar Heels family might take comfort. It was cruel indeed to see the extraordinary agency with which Dean Smith commanded his life, and so much of college basketball, edge away and finally vanish long before his death. But there should be some solace in knowing that, much longer ago, the man himself had made his peace with not being in control. □

“He was my coach even though I never played a second for him,” Williams said. “I have him on a pedestal.”



THE NEWS came on Feb. 11 that Tark was gone, a basketball Rebel dead at 84. An image rose to mind: a parking lot outside a practice gymnasium, faintly lit by tall streetlights rising from asphalt laid where once there had surely been sand and snakes and cactus. A 61-year-old man with a bald head, reaching the end of something. Or the beginning. With Jerry Tarkanian it was always difficult to know for sure.

The first time I met Tarkanian was two years earlier, in 1990. As a reporter for *Newsday*, I had been assigned to cover the West Regional of the NCAA tournament, in Oakland. Tarkanian already seemed larger than life. He had built a competitive program from nothing at Long Beach State, battled the NCAA and twice gone to the Final Four. But this time he brought a machine to the regional. The sentimental favorite in Oakland was Loyola Marymount, playing in memory of the deceased Hank Gathers. UNLV ran the Lions out of the building on a Sunday afternoon. My editor told me to go straight to Las Vegas and then to Denver for the Final Four.

Like any reporter, I fretted about access to the mighty Runnin' Rebels. Silly me. In Vegas, I spent three days watching Tarkanian's team practice as if meals would be withheld for any lack of effort, and then watching the entire team stay for individual drills that

lasted into the evening. I interviewed Tarkanian until the batteries on my tape recorder went dead, because he just loved it when people showed up to watch his team practice and loved to tell stories about basketball and life in that raspy voice of his. Tarkanian was a full-service subject; he even recommended a suite hotel near the campus, where, I'm convinced, he got a cut of the action. I left the desert on a Thursday morning, and four days later UNLV ran Duke out of McNichols Arena 103-73, giving Tarkanian his only national championship.

Variations on this scenario were repeated over the next two years. Tarkanian and UNLV went unbeaten in the 1990-91 regular season before losing to Duke in the Final Four in Indianapolis. And as Tarkanian engaged in public spitting matches with the NCAA (he called it the "two-A"), he also

clashed with UNLV president Robert Maxson, who spoke of elevating the educational profile of the university (and its president) while distancing it from the high rollers who had turned Tarkanian into a wealthy Strip celebrity, and the Thomas & Mack Center into the hottest venue in the city. Once in '91, I came to town and interviewed Maxson for hours and Tarkanian for hours more (as he drove around the city, talking on any one of his half-dozen "car phones"), wrote a long story and, on the day it was published, got a call from Tarkanian. "You son of a bitch," he said, "you come out here and act like you're our friend, and then you go write this bulls--- from Maxson." I tried teaching him a brief journalism lesson about fairness and two sides to any story, but you were either with Tark or against him. Yet, as with so many of his players, there would be second chances

to talk, and third and fourth. The man could not stay angry.

Tarkanian's UNLV career ended on the third night of March 1992. By then the world—and the NCAA—had seen a photograph of his players lounging in a hot tub with a man who had been convicted of point-shaving. There would be no postseason for Tarkanian's last Rebels team. For that final game we all came back to Vegas with our notebooks and old-school laptops to see Tark cry on the floor of the Thomas & Mack while the crowd roared.

But that is not what I remember most. On the day before his final game as coach of the Rebels, Tarkanian finished practice and then talked with writers. At some point there were just Malcolm Moran of *The New York Times* and me. The questioning fizzled out, the three of us walked toward the parking lot, and Tarkanian said, "You guys have any plans for dinner?"

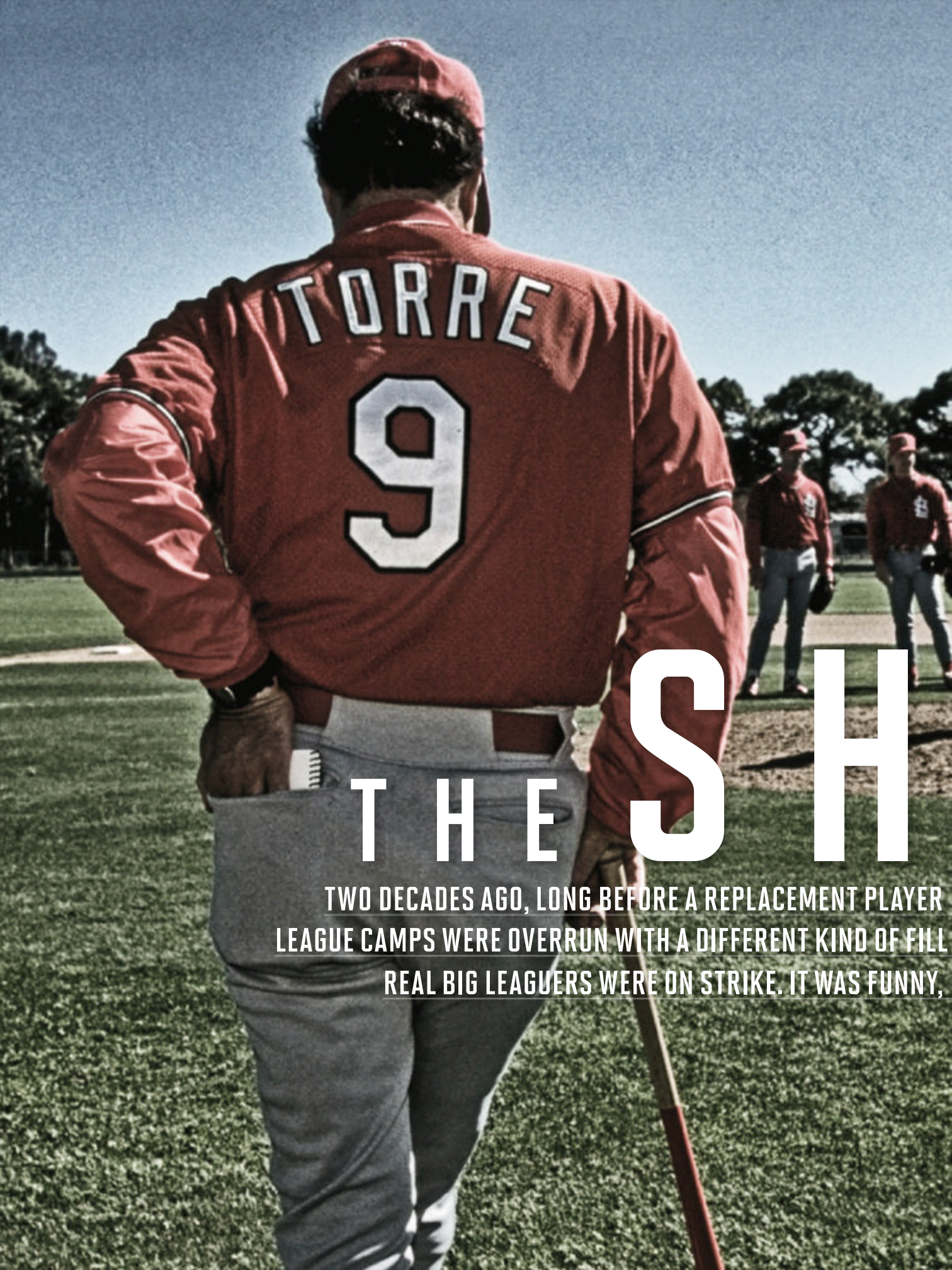
Here was the king of the Strip, looking to maybe grab a bowl of pasta with a couple of writers from out of town who were preparing to write a large portion of his professional epitaph the next night. But looking back, it made sense. Tarkanian was a basketball junkie with a disdain for rules that impeded him. He was about the scoreboard, the money, the wins. He wasn't larger than life at all. He was just life, lived exactly his own way. □



1930–2015

Jerry Tarkanian

By TIM LAYDEN



THE SH

TWO DECADES AGO, LONG BEFORE A REPLACEMENT PLAYER
LEAGUE CAMPS WERE OVERRUN WITH A DIFFERENT KIND OF FILL
REAL BIG LEAGUERS WERE ON STRIKE. IT WAS FUNNY,

MLB

THE SHOW
MUST GO ON

The owners' insistence on staging spring training made managers like the Cardinals' Torre awkward middle men—and molders of not-ready-for-prime-time talent.

AM SPRING

WAS A WELL-KNOWN SABERMETRIC MEASURING STICK, MAJOR
-IN: HORDES OF HAS-BEENS AND WANNABES CHASING DREAMS WHILE
SHAMEFUL—AND FOR ONE PLAYER, TRAGIC

BY TOM VERDUCCI

Photograph by
Chuck Solomon for Sports Illustrated



THE REPLACEMENTS

When President Barack Obama announced Sonia Sotomayor as a Supreme Court nominee in 2009, he said, “Some say Judge Sotomayor saved baseball.” At the very least, in 1995 she had saved baseball from the ultimate embarrassment: having replacement players take part in actual major league games. Using replacements in spring training, while the major league players union was in the midst of a walkout, was temerarious enough. Depending on your point of view, the owners’ decision to field impostor teams in Arizona and Florida was a necessary bluff, a travesty or an unintentionally comedic break from the hostilities of a 232-day labor war. In fact, it was all of that and then some.

On Jan. 13, 1995, baseball’s executive council voted to approve the use of replacement players while the real major leaguers were on strike, a dark period that began when the union walked out the previous August and included the cancellation of the ’94 World Series. “We are committed to playing the 1995 season and will do so with the best players willing to play,” acting commissioner Bud Selig said in a statement.

What happened over the next 11 weeks now reads like the script to a movie that couldn’t possibly be based on real events. The Angels found a 33-year-old catcher at Home Depot. The Mets’ second baseman was a landscaper from Alabama named Bubba who had not played ball in five years. The Tigers signed a 35-year-old garbage truck driver who had last pitched in the big leagues in 1989. You half expected to see Walter Matthau in the dugout and Tatum O’Neal on the mound.

The Cardinals opened camp with a staggering 111 players. The Orioles refused to field a team at all. The owners were prepared to begin the regular season with no team in Toronto (Ontario labor law banned the use of replacement workers, forcing the Blue Jays to plan for regular-season games at their Dunedin, Fla., training site), no team in Baltimore, and a motley collection of car salesmen, truck drivers, janitors, police officers, teachers and veritable fantasy league campers looking

for their one—or, in the many cases of washed-up former pros, second, third or fourth—shot at major league glory.

Sotomayor, then a federal district court judge in Manhattan, effectively ended this parallel baseball universe by issuing an injunction against the owners on March 31, 1995, two days before the Mets and the Marlins were to play the Sunday-night regular-season opener.

The timing, she wrote, was “important to ensure that the symbolic value of that day is not tainted by an unfair labor practice.”

Selig’s term as commissioner came to an official end last month, and history will record that he oversaw unprecedented growth in the game. Buoyed by 20 years of labor peace, the sport’s revenues grew from \$1.4 billion in 1995 to \$9 billion last year—and to appreciate that growth, you have to understand where baseball stood when camps opened in ’95. Players distrusted the owners. Owners fought with one another. And wedged between them were hundreds of replacement players like Braves pitcher Dave Shotkoski, a 30-year-old supervisor at a Coca-Cola plant outside of Chicago and a former minor league journeyman who had been out of the game for three years. Shotkoski left his wife and eight-month-old girl at home in North Aurora, Ill., for one more chance at the major leagues.

The owners were staging a false spring.

But the effects of it were very real. Replacement baseball turned out so badly that owners never again sought a salary cap from the players; baseball remains the only major pro sport without one. Replacement baseball also altered the careers of many men, including Sparky Anderson, Joe Torre, Michael Jordan and, most tragically of all, Dave Shotkoski.

THE BEST players willing.”

After Selig promised in January 1995 that the game would go on, general managers immediately went into a four-week scramble to find players to fill their spring rosters. Accurately anticipating the poststrike animosity the real major leaguers would harbor toward replacements, the general managers avoided asking better prospects who were not yet union members to sign up. So they turned over every rock, calling has-beens and never-weres with such frantic desperation that one GM, upon finding that the telephone number of a former player he called belonged to someone else—it turned out to be a sportswriter—asked the man on the other end of the line, “Well, how about you? Can you play?”

Dennis (Oil Can) Boyd, then 35, was one of the first former big leaguers to sign up. Boyd, who pitched 10 seasons in the majors and had been kicking around independent ball for three years, signed with the White Sox. He thought baseball had slammed



IT WASN'T EXACTLY A QUALITY GUARANTEE: AS THE STRIKE DRAGGED ON, THE COMMISSIONER SAID THE 1995 SEASON WOULD BE PLAYED WITH THE **"BEST PLAYERS WILLING."**



CASTING CALLS

After Selig (left) declared camps open, the Reds (above) and 27 other teams held open tryouts.

the door in his face after the 1991 season—he couldn't get a job after he posted a 4.59 ERA in 31 starts with Montreal and Texas—and now a labor dispute had opened it again.

Pitcher Doug Sisk, 37, rejoined the Mets after three years out of the game, only to hurt his arm the first time he threw off a mound. Infielder Lenny Randle was 46 years old and had been out of the majors for 12 years when he joined the Angels, though he had been playing in Italy. He hit .333 in 24 spring at bats before he was cut.

Pedro Borbon, who was so old he was once a teammate of Hoyt Wilhelm, returned to the Reds. He was 48 years old, 45 pounds overweight and had not pitched in the big leagues since 1980, prompting Pirates manager Jim Leyland to call the righthander's return "a disgrace." To re-comply with Cincinnati's policy against facial hair, Borbon had to shave the mustache he

had worn for 15 years. Borbon, who was raising birds in Texas, later sent two parrots to Cincinnati manager Davey Johnson. One of the birds died of a respiratory infection. Johnson's wife, Susan, soon contracted a respiratory infection herself.

Jeff Stone, 34 and out of baseball for four years, left a job on the loading dock of a Missouri steel mill to return to the Phillies. Once considered something of a phenom, the outfielder became better known for his malaprops and unintended humor, like the time he left a new television set in Venezuela, where he had been playing winter ball, because, he complained, "it only gets Spanish stations." When he became a replacement, Stone reasoned, "My baseball days are over, so it wasn't like I was going to be taking anyone's job. I look at this like a vacation."

Terry Blocker, 35, signed with the Braves after working as a cable-TV technician in 1994, moving on from baseball after spending his final four seasons in the Mexican League. The outfielder, also a former Pentecostal deacon, had played the last of his 110 big league games in '89.

The Tigers signed Chris Brown, 33, an infielder who had been out of the game for five years and who had gained such infamy for his malingering that he was known as Downtime Brown. He once sat out a game because he slept on his eye wrong. Brown claimed



to be a new man in 1995, but it took until only the third game of the exhibition season for Downtime to need some downtime. He told the team he couldn't play due to a sore back, then sat out for a week, whereupon Detroit traded him to the Reds for a player to be named. "We signed Chris because we wanted to see if he could still play," Tigers interim manager Tom Runnells said. "But, you know, it's really hard to see anything when he's not available."

Runnells served as Detroit's manager that spring because Anderson, the future Hall of Famer, refused to manage replacement players. The Tigers' front office, seething, considered it an unpaid leave. Anderson came back when the real major leaguers returned, but his relationship with the club continued to erode. Anderson quit after the 1995 season. He was only 61 and said he wanted to manage again if the right situation came along. He never managed another day in the big leagues, sparking speculation that his refusal to work with the replacement Tigers caused him to be blackballed. Anderson, though, never regretted his decision. In his '98 memoir written with Dan Ewald, Anderson wrote, "Strange, but it was the proudest moment of my career."

Other managers showed up for work but didn't like it. Upon watching the 111 Cardinals he inherited begin their inaugural workout lap, Torre joked that the group resembled the thick pack of runners at the start of the New York City Marathon. Torre had enjoyed three straight winning seasons with St. Louis from 1991 to '93, but the team was 53–61 when the strike hit in '94. Torre, a staunch union rep in the players' association's early years, didn't share the same enthusiasm for replacement ball as did Anheuser-Busch, which owned the Cardinals, and he was fired just 47 games after the strike ended, with a 20–27 record. The experience so soured Torre that he figured he never would manage again.

MICHAEL JORDAN was so excited for the 1995 baseball season that he showed up a week early in February for the White Sox' minor league camp. The previous year, at age 31, Jordan hit .202 for the Double A Birmingham Barons despite not having played baseball since high school. He stole 30 bases and drove in 51 runs. The former NBA star may not have been a major league prospect, but his love for the game, work ethic and improvement gave a modest authenticity to his second career.

Jordan, however, did not want to cross the picket line or be used as leverage by the owners as an exhibition drawing card. On the first official day of workouts, Feb. 18, Jordan told reporters in Sarasota, Fla., "I'm not here to break down what

the players are trying to achieve." On March 2, Jordan stuffed his gear into a Chicago Bulls duffel bag and left camp. On March 10 he officially announced his retirement from baseball—due entirely to the strike. Nine days later Jordan scored 19 points for the Bulls against Indiana.

IF YOU reached the voice mail of Orioles pitcher Mike Mussina during replacement ball, this is what you heard: "Hello, and welcome to the replacement baseball season. If you are having trouble reaching your trash collector, accountant or local contractor, you may want to try Florida or Arizona. However, if you wish to leave a message, please do so at this time, and I'll be sure to tell you when the real guys are going back to work."

The major leaguers made it clear they were angry at the

ANDERSON LATER SAID HIS REFUSAL TO MANAGE



FAT CHANCE

Borbon (above) tried a gutty comeback; the faux Expos' bobbles (right) were all too real.



players they called scabs. Angels pitcher Mark Langston said they should stay as far as possible from baseball once the strike was settled. Mets pitcher John Franco promised to drill any of them with a pitch if he faced one.

Many of the replacement players crossed the picket line for the money, and because the dream of being a major leaguer still flickered inside them. Replacement players received a \$5,000 signing bonus, at least \$80 a day in expense money, a \$5,000 bonus if they made an Opening Day roster and at

least a prorated \$115,000 salary for the regular season.

That was very good money to many of them. The Reds signed an outfielder named Motorboat Jones, who had played independent ball in 1994 after spending seven years in the Reds' organization, mostly in Class A and below. Jones had been mopping floors in Gadsden, Ala., for \$120 a week. His brother, Speedboat Jones, a lefthanded pitcher who spent seven years in the minors with the Blue Jays and the Mariners, signed with Toronto. When the Jays faced the Reds in an exhibition game, the two brothers squared off for one historic plate appearance: Speedboat vs. Motorboat. Motorboat walked.

Among the most recognizable names of the replacement spring were Jim Boudreau, Pete Rose Jr. and Ted Williams. Boudreau, 35, the son of Hall of Famer Lou Boudreau, gave up two runs in one inning for Pittsburgh in his first professional appearance since 1986, when he was in Double A. Cracked



REPLACEMENTS WAS THE “PROUDEST MOMENT OF MY CAREER.”

Pittsburgh broadcaster Steve Blass, “He should have been better pitching on 3,195 days rest.”

Rose, wearing number 14 for the White Sox, played in replacement exhibition games but said he would not play in the regular season, then said he *would* play regular-season games because the major leaguers already considered him a strikebreaker. Referring to himself in the third person, the son of the alltime hit leader said, “This is about Pete Rose Jr. going out and making himself a better baseball player.”

The replacement Ted Williams—no relation to the Hall of Fame slugger—was a minor league journeyman who, because of his speed, was known as The Splendid Sprinter. Pirates GM Cam Bonifay traded him to Kansas City for “future considerations,” prompting reporters to ask Bonifay if he forever would be known as the man who traded Ted Williams. Said Bonifay, “If I’m asked that one more time. . . .”

In a perfect coincidence that typified the facsimile of major league baseball that was replacement ball, in the same game Boudreau pitched to Rose and was pinch-hit for by Williams.

SELIG’S “BEST PLAYERS WILLING” decree made no promises about the quality of play—and it was awful. The Mets started the exhibition season 0–9, a stretch in which they batted .191, were no-hit and didn’t hit a home run until the last game of the streak. Their 10th game was tied 0–0 against Kansas City after eight innings; the Mets won in the ninth after the deciding run reached base on a dropped third strike. The team batting average dropped to .182. The attendance at Baseball City Stadium in Haines City, Fla., was 743.

The replacement Yankees unofficially helped open Coors Field in Denver with a two-game exhibition series in late March. In three days at the world’s greatest hitters’ park, they did not hit a home run—and that included batting practice.

Johnson, the Reds’ manager, called the level of play “a trav-

esty,” comparing it to Class A independent ball. Mariners manager Lou Piniella, after watching his players pack on weight from the generous clubhouse spread, ordered the cheese, potato chips, ice cream and other snacks off limits. After a 13–0 loss, Piniella complained about the noticeable lack of velocity of his pitchers. “Some of [the pitches] were under the radar gun,” he said. “You know if you fly low enough, you can’t be picked up [by radar].”

Leyland, preparing for the possibility that he would have to start the regular season with his over-the-hill gang, planned to use a two-platoon system to take advantage of the 32-man roster MLB was allowing (with only 25 players designated as active each day)—one day on and one day off. Explained the Pirates’ manager, “We have to see who we can get out of the whirlpool and onto the field.”

EARLY IN the evening of March 24, Dave Shotkoski left his hotel in West Palm Beach, Fla., for his usual after-dinner walk. Shotkoski had not pitched in professional baseball since 1991, the last of the six minor league seasons he spent toiling in seven cities for the Braves, Athletics and Angels. He was done at age 26, with a career record of 18–24 and a 5.07 ERA. But when Atlanta, his original organization, invited him back, Shotkoski left his supervisor job at Coca-Cola and reported to the Braves’ camp in West Palm Beach. Inside his locker he hung a picture of his wife, Felicia, and baby daughter, Alexis. While future Hall of Fame pitchers Greg Maddux, Tom Glavine and John Smoltz were on strike, Shotkoski set about earning a spot on manager Bobby Cox’s pitching staff. Shotkoski had told Felicia this was “the best spring training” he ever enjoyed. Felicia knew her husband was a kid at heart, one who never let go of a seven-year-old’s dream.

CALL TO ARMS

As the Blue Jays (left) searched for pitchers, Anderson (above) told reporters he’d return with the real players.



Shotkoski had taken to these regular evening walks as a way to fight the boredom that came from missing his family and from an ankle injury that had limited him to one inning in exhibition games. These being replacement players, not millionaire major leaguers, Shotkoski and the other replacements were staying at a Ramada Inn, not far from a dangerous section of town.

Sometime before 6:40 p.m., about 500 yards from the hotel, a man rode up to Shotkoski on a yellow bicycle, pulled out a .22-caliber revolver and aimed it at him. West Palm Beach police said there was “a brief encounter” with no signs of a struggle. Three shots rang out. The assailant rode off on his bike. Shotkoski, wounded, ran for about a hundred yards before he collapsed on a sidewalk near an office building. There Dave Shotkoski died from multiple gunshot wounds.

SHOTKOSKI HAD TOLD HIS WIFE THAT THIS WAS “THE BEST SPRING TRAINING” OF HIS BASEBALL LIFE.

TERRY BLOCKER, the former Pentecostal deacon, saw a fellow family man in his teammate Shotkoski. He made a mental note that he would find the time to talk to Shotkoski about faith.

Camp had not gone well for Blocker. His knee ached, and it was clear the skills he flashed at Tennessee State in 1981, when the Mets took him with the fourth pick of the draft, were long gone. Blocker had hit .341 in his first year in pro ball, and the next year joined Darryl Strawberry and Billy Beane in the starting outfield of the Double A Jackson Mets. Strawberry would go on to earn \$31 million in the major leagues, and Beane would gain fame as the general manager of the Athletics. Stardom never visited Blocker. He spent parts of three big league seasons with Atlanta and the Mets, batting .205, and reached the end of his nondescript playing days with the replacement Braves of '95.

On the night of March 24, shortly after he heard about Shotkoski's death, Blocker ventured into Pleasant City, one of West Palm Beach's worst neighborhoods, about two miles from the Ramada Inn. Blocker knew West Palm well, having trained there with the Braves in 1988 and '89. He remembered giving \$100 back then to a local man down on his luck. He contacted the man and asked for his help in finding Shotkoski's killer.

Starting at 10 that night, and lasting for hours, Blocker and the man hung out on street corners in Pleasant City. Someone threatened to steal Blocker's gold watch and Triple A championship ring. Another man, calling himself Dr. Dre after the well-known rapper, blew crack smoke into Blocker's face and challenged him to a fight. Blocker had lived on the wild side himself as a youngster,

sometimes carrying a gun while growing up in Columbia, S.C. He had reformed his life, though, and as he entered Pleasant City, he maintained what he would admit later was a strange sense of calm. He learned nothing, however.

The next day Blocker went back into Pleasant City, this time under the pretext of doing his laundry. He ran into Dr. Dre again. They talked, and Blocker asked him to keep an ear out for information.

At 4:30 the next morning, Dr. Dre called Blocker's friend in Pleasant City. He had heard something. A man with the street name Thousand was bragging that he had killed a Braves pitcher.



BRAVES BOND

Blocker (right) helped hunt down the man who killed Shotkoski (left, with an Angels farm team in 1991) in West Palm Beach.



Blocker took the tip to the West Palm Beach police. They were well acquainted with Thousand, a 30-year-old man named Neal Douglas Evans who had 13 previous arrests involving drugs, robbery and firearms. The police had been looking for Evans since August, when he had skipped a meeting with his parole officer.

Later, the police realized that they had Evans in custody twice in the last five months and didn't know it. Evans had been arrested the previous November on a trespassing charge and again on Feb. 24 for selling fake cocaine. In each case he had told police his name was Michael Evans, and the police booked him that way—creating an entirely separate identity and criminal database—and released him. Police didn't link Michael Evans to Neal Douglas Evans until it was too late. The police found Evans the same night Blocker gave them the tip. He was arrested for first-degree murder and robbery.

The police and the Braves had posted a \$10,000 reward for information about Shotkoski's killer. Blocker declined the money. Instead, he told police to give the money to Felicia, Shotkoski's widow.

In February 1997, Neal Douglas Evans was sentenced to 27 years in prison for the murder of Dave Shotkoski. On April 3, 2012, Evans was released for good behavior. It was his fifth time in prison and the fifth time he was released early; each of the first four releases was followed by a parole violation. On June 14, 2012—two months out of prison—Evans was arrested for cocaine possession. Florida Department of Corrections records show that he is incarcerated at Okeechobee Correctional Institution with a release date of Jan. 11, 2021.

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WITH OPENING DAY just days away, hundreds of players knew they were closer than ever to realizing their dream. It was the ultimate fantasy camp. But one big day stood between them and the majors: Judge Sotomayor had scheduled her hearing for March 31, the Friday before the Mets and the Marlins opened the regular season on Sunday night, with most of the other 26 teams scheduled to begin on Monday.

"The equipment is being packed, Leyland is talking about going north," said Mike Daniel, a Pirates replacement catcher who had spent four years in the minors, nearly the whole time in Class A. "Our hearts are pounding. . . . We go home every night and put on the TV and hope we still have a job. We're so close, yet . . . I think what we would miss most if this is taken away from us isn't the money, but being baseball players again. A lot of us [are] hoping the strike would last forever."

Replacement players such as Joe Aragon, a 33-year-old second baseman for the Twins, openly rooted for the strike to drag on. "Put yourself in our position," he told reporters. "You'd feel the same way. This is a great opportunity, and the longer we're here, the better shape we're going to get in and the better we'll play. We're not a bunch of truck drivers and cappuccino drinkers."

That's when a reporter pointed out to him that—ahem—Aragon had, in fact, been a truck driver.

"I'm a cappuccino drinker too," he admitted with a laugh.

On March 30, the day before Judge Sotomayor would rule, owners dug in their heels. They voted 26–2 to proceed with replacement players in the regular season, with the resolution adding that "those games will count." Only Baltimore and Toronto voted against the measure. No one had any idea what would happen if there were a baseball season and one franchise, Peter Angelos's Orioles, refused to field a team.

Tension filled spring training camps. "These guys," said Pirates coach Rich Donnelly, surveying the replacements, "look like it's a quarter to 12 and they're waiting for the governor to call."

The decision from Sotomayor came quickly. The Cubs and the Brewers were in the second inning of an exhibition game in Mesa, Ariz., when word spread that she had ruled against



SAID ONE WOULD-BE MAJOR LEAGUER, "A LOT OF US WERE HOPING THE STRIKE WOULD LAST FOREVER."



SPRING FLINGS

Stone (left) went home, but Millar (above) was the rare replacement to stay on as a major leaguer.

the owners. Said Milwaukee starting pitcher Mike Farrell, a lefthander who would spend six years in the minors, including four in Triple A, without ever reaching the big leagues, "I can't believe she ruled before I finished my game. I already knew this might be the last one or whatever, but dang, at least give me a little time, you know?"

The major league players, as promised, announced an end to the strike upon the ruling. Still, confusion reigned. No one was sure if the owners' response would be to order a lockout. The owners scheduled a meeting at a Chicago hotel for Sunday, April 2, what should have been Opening Day. The replacements hung around their camps, waiting to hear whether they would be flying to Opening Day or flying home for good.

The owners met for 4½ hours. The hard-line small-market owners, led by the White Sox' Jerry Reinsdorf, wanted the lockout. Led by Angelos and George Steinbrenner of the Yankees, the big-market teams wanted to play ball. No vote was taken, probably because Selig knew the hawks couldn't get the 21 votes needed to support a lockout. The owners simply surrendered, accepting the players' offer to return to work.

Nearly all of the replacement players were released, though a handful, including Kevin Millar, Rick Reed and Brendan Donnelly, remained in affiliated baseball and found their way to the big leagues and—in the cases of those three players—even the World Series. (Such players never were permitted to join the union or share in licensing

money, though they did receive union representation in matters such as arbitration or grievances.) The last remaining replacement player in the majors, pitcher Ron Mahay, was cut by the Dodgers in spring training 2011.

Not even Selig could have predicted that April 2, 1995, would be the first day of two decades and counting of labor peace. He emerged from the owners' meeting that day and announced, "Replacement baseball, as of this time, is gone. If you're asking ever, I can't give you that."

The acting commissioner then personally thanked the replacements, who, he said, "interrupted their lives to help us out."

Jeff Stone understood. Both a former Phillie and a faux Phillie, Stone could have his moments of confusion. (He is said to have once politely declined an offer of a shrimp cocktail by replying, "No, thanks. I don't drink.") But he understood what spring training 1995 meant for him and his fellow best players willing. "I guess you could call us pawns if you wanted to," he said as he packed up to leave Phillies camp. "But I had a ball." □



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A New Reality

→ BY ALAN SHIPNUCK



BEFORE THE WHEATIES BOXES, Malibu

beach house, three shattered marriages, fame and tabloid infamy—before all that, Bruce Jenner was a \$9,000-a-year insurance salesman in San Jose struggling to overcome dyslexia. Before *that*, he was a quarterback at tiny Graceland College in Lamoni, Iowa, which followed a bucolic boyhood in New York and Connecticut. The young Jenner's grandest ambition was to be a professional water-skier.

The 1976 Olympics changed him forever. Jenner had begun dabbling in the decathlon at Graceland; the event was ideal for a natural athlete who was good at a lot of things but not great at any of them. He won gold at the Montreal Games, and the timing was exquisite—as the U.S. celebrated its bicentennial, here was an all-American hero with great teeth and perfectly feathered hair, 6' 2" of corded muscle, vitality and virility.

In 1977, Jenner joined ABC Sports and often worked alongside Al Michaels. “There are generations of Americans who don’t know, or don’t remember, but he was as huge as an athlete can get,” says Michaels. But Jenner still didn’t like what he saw in the mirror: He had the first of his plastic surgeries decades ago. “I remember thinking that was pretty odd,” says Michaels. “Here you have this great-looking guy who everybody adored, yet he wanted to alter his appearance. Then again, there was always a little air of mystery around Bruce.”

The intrigue has reached a fever pitch in recent months, as photographs have shown Jenner, 65, looking increasingly feminine amid reports that he has taken steps toward gender transition. The tabloid frenzy took a darker turn on Feb. 7, when Jenner was involved in a chain-reaction crash in Malibu that resulted in the death of another motorist. (Jenner was unhurt; an investigation is ongoing.) Jenner has made no public comment about his plans, but the prurient fascination is of a piece with a life that has become spectacle. Blame the Kardashians. In 1991, Jenner wed the former Kris Houghton, who had recently divorced O.J. Simpson’s friend and lawyer, Robert Kardashian. Bruce and Kris each came with four kids from previous marriages, and together they had two more, a gaggle of good-looking Hollywood brats who spawned a reality-show empire. *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* has

With few
well-known
public faces
for the
transgender
community,

Jenner is
being
positioned

as a
transformational
figure.



Can Bruce
Jenner
become a
different kind
of role model?

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been airing since 2007, and through the years Jenner has often been forced to play the fool, tinkering with his remote control helicopters in the garage, both emasculated and infantilized by Kris.

A prominent entertainment-industry reporter who spoke on the condition of anonymity says it was common knowledge on the set that Jenner liked to wear the clothes and makeup of the women in his household. It was only after Bruce and Kris divorced in 2014 that Jenner’s appearance began to visibly change. “Can you imagine the agony she felt for all those years?” says Genny Beemyn, the director of the Stonewall Foundation at UMass-Amherst, using the feminine pronoun for Jenner. (Since Jenner has not confirmed a transition, SI, like other news organizations, continues to use *he*.) “Here you have the paradigm of the all-star male athlete, and yet it’s pretty clear she didn’t feel male.”

Jenner is being positioned as a transformational figure for the transgender community, not least because of the widely rumored reality show that would document the male-to-female transition. Says Beemyn, “There is tremendous potential to educate. That we’re even debating pronouns has to be some kind of progress. Bruce Jenner has a chance to show the world that being transgender is a regular part of human diversity.”

For so long Jenner has been defined by Olympic glory: In the years after Montreal he wore a necklace bearing the numerals 73076, the date he won gold, and the mainsail on his boat was emblazoned with 8618, his record point total from that decathlon. In 1980, Jenner told SI, “Because of the Olympics, people put me on such a high pedestal. It’s just about impossible to live a normal life.” Jenner appears to be redefining what is normal, before a rapt public. His new legacy may endure well after the gold no longer glitters. □



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